

Vido 7912

As Father and Son —

The galaxy will be ours.

The emperor will be thrown down

And peace will be restored

The fragmenting pieces of

This once civilization

Shall be joined and made whole,

And it will be OUR doing.

Together,

We will hold the hearts of

The populus.

They will fall on their knees before us,

And hail us as Saviors.

Their allegiance will be only to

Us.

Greatness will be the main spring

Of our reign,

And after us

That of our heirs.

History will revere us, and

As father and son

We will be worshipped

And glorified.

BETZ BOWLES

Allegre '01

| page | contribution | contributor |
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"Special Modifications" (c) 1980, 1981 by Jani Hicks.

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 Backcover: "In the Greenwood" by Edith Crowe
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TIME WARP 5

EDITORIAL LAMENTATIONS:

It's that time again, folks. Anne is standing over me with a threatening expression saying, "Write your editorial--it's time to go to press." If you knew how much I hate to write... The only thing making this even halfway palatable is the fact that I have several thank-yous and credits (and one "I'll get you for this!").

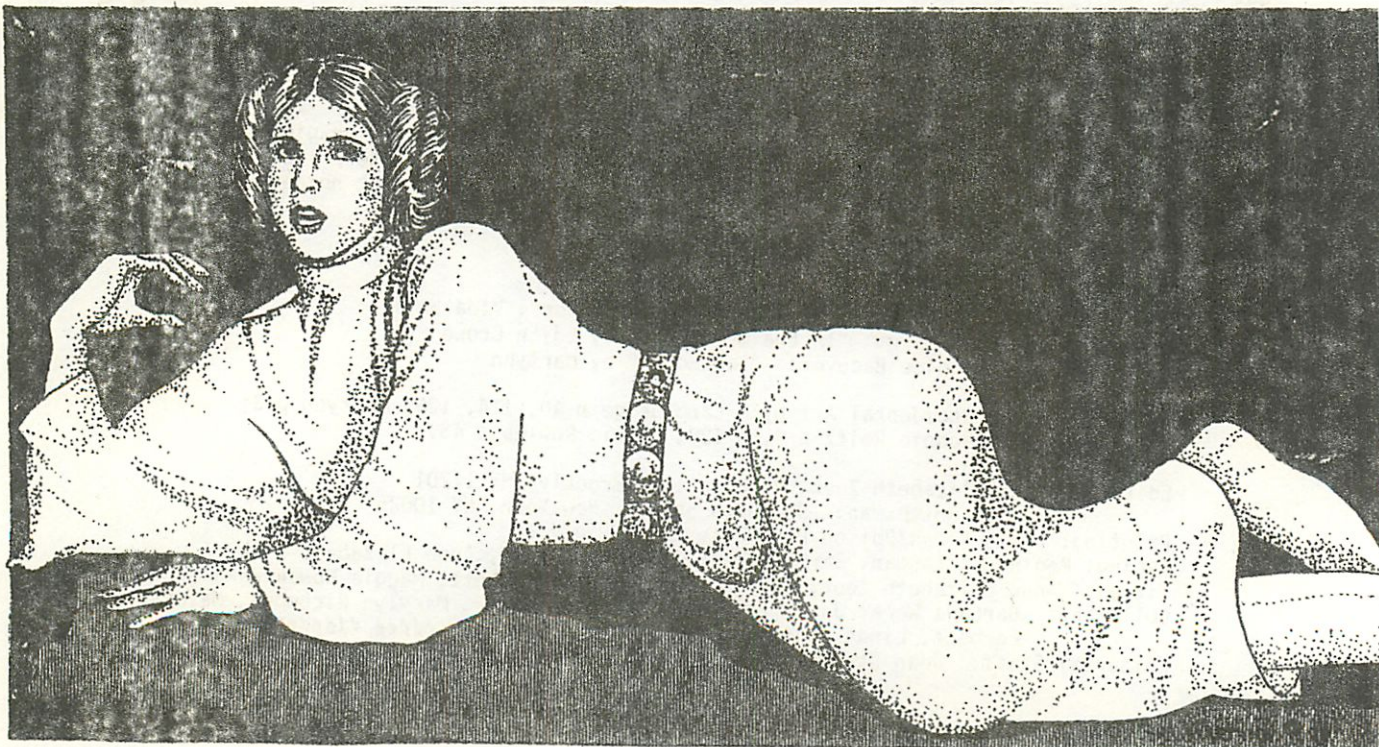
During the lull (?) between TIME WARP 4 and now, I have changed jobs and professions. I am now in the word processing field, and I love it. So I said to Anne, "I'll do all the typing, and we can use Zen and Orac and do it right--justified columns and everything!" Little did I know... Therefore, first on the list of thank-yous is a big one to Zen and Orac (no, not the ones of *Liberator* fame, the ones in my office--and if you think a word processing workstation and printer can't be as stubborn and/or temperamental as their namesakes, you have obviously never worked with one--or a computer...) and Barbara Wenk and Peter (another workstation)--I couldn't have done it without you, and wouldn't have wanted to.

Before I forget, a definite thank you to Jill McCaul, who introduced me to Blake, Avon, and the rest of the crew(s) of the *Liberator* and then kindly fed my "habit"; and to Heather Nachman and Linda Melnick for showing me that a *Blake's 7* fandom has sprung up in the U.S. (behind my back, between the time I came back from Seacon in 1979 and now).

On the "I'll get you for this" side, a big one to Linda Deneroff, who said (upon being elected to chair Lunacon '81, the New York Science Fiction Society--The Lunarians, Inc.'s annual convention), "How'd you like to do the program book?" Being a good friend, I said, "Okay." This then grew into chief shoulder to cry on, editor/production chief on the progress report,... well, you get the picture. (Time out here for a thank you to Allyson Whitfield, who helped me keep my sanity--what little there is of it! Now back to Linda...) To top it all off, she's just delivered GUARDIAN 3 to the printer, and she takes off for Jamaica (the island, not Queens), leaving the printer my name in case anything comes up...which, of course, it does. Linda--you'll get yours!*

One last very important thank you--to the crew of *Columbia* and the men and women behind them--for reaffirming our route to the stars and rekindling the dream.

*It's already started--we work fast around here. No sooner does she get back from Jamaica than she is drafted to do some of the final typing and paste-up for this issue. We may work fast--but we also work right up to the last minute. And you wondered why the issue you hold in your hands (if you picked us up at MediaWest*Con) seemed a little...um..."damp"!



Gentlebeings:

Once again this is being written at the last possible moment before a con that TIME WARP may not even debut at. One half of the zine still to go and. . . *sigh* There has to be a better way to prove my insanity to the world!

Be that as it may, the zine you now clutch in your eager hands is, in many respects, the work of years. Back in 1978 I got the idea for a "Mirror Worlds" zine--a special one-shot filled to the brim with stories set in the "Mirror, Mirror" universe. Well, that was great. Seems that "Mirror, Mirror" was the favorite episode of quite a few people.

Only trouble was, everybody wanted to read "Mirror" stories, hardly anyone wanted to write them. Our thanks to Crystal Ann Taylor and Sarah Leibold. Their submissions were among the first we received; our thanks to them, also, for their patience in waiting to see their words in print. We would have understood completely had they decided to pull their pieces and submit them elsewhere in the intervening years. They did not, and so we are able to present them to you here.

Submissions began to filter in from others, but there was still not enough to fill a good sized zine. Finally, we decided to open to submissions for any "alternate reality" and to make the "Mirror Worlds" issue a regularly scheduled part of TIME WARP. Any of you who ordered MIRROR WORLDS will receive TIME WARP 5. We hope you enjoy it.

A word about some of our submissions. . .

"The Emperor's Nephew Strikes Back: A Satire" is based only on "The Emperor's Nephew" and STAR WARS. It was written in 1979 (in a blazing heat of ~~fantasy~~ inspiration) and does not have any relationship to the events in TESB.

"Covenant in the Mirror" is the mirror image of Lois Welling's "Covenant" universe. "Covenant" appeared in GUARDIAN 2; the sequel to "Covenant", "Domestic Arrangements", will appear in MASIFORM-D. See our blurbles page for addresses for these zines.

"Through the Eye of the Tiger" introduces War Commander Kirk. We already have another story in this universe from Bonnie for TW 6.

"New York City Stray" should be self-explanatory. The official sequel to "Cat Dancing" will be in TW 6.

Karen Osman's set of poems, "Reflection", is an attempt to show the thoughts of an ordinary storm-trooper and of Lord Vader. These poems, also, were written, submitted, and accepted prior to the release of TESB.

"Request Denied" is based on the ST novelization. Yes, you know what inspired it. Right. That scene. Hmmmhun.

Er, uh, yes. The story contest. Well, now, I could say that this little teaser sprang full-blomed from the fertile mind of Barbara

Wenk--except that that's not really exactly true, and Barbara'd probably hit me if I said that. You really want the truth? Well, you see, I'm writing this Leia-series entitled VENDETTA and--you sure you want to hear?--I wanted to get an idea of how Leia would look dressed as a Corellian. I took the Kenner action figure doll and dressed her in the Han figure's outfit (and, for future information, what you wind up with is NOT Leia. It's Cori Beckett!) so I could see. Now being a modest person, I did not want a naked Han Solo figure drifting around my apartment. Since I'm not a doll-collector, I didn't have any thing to put on the doll--except the clothes I'd just taken off Leia. Presto, changeo--instantly, one rakish Corellian smuggler was transformed into a noble monk. Sort of. Of course, one thing led to another and soon. . . Well, anyone, YOU can finish the story now. Oh yes, and the winner gets a free copy of #6 and of #7.

"Special Modifications" is part of Jani Hicks's "Contraverse" universe. There will be another Kallani story in TW #6, and there is also a story from this universe in TWIN SUNS 2.

"Sandcastles" is a chilling mirror version of Eileen Roy's "Jai" universe. Other "Jai" stories have appeared in INTERPHASE 3 and 4, TIME WARP 2, IDIC 6.

"Second Chance" started out as a LOC in response to "One Way Mirror" (see our blurbles page). Talk about creativity engendering still more creativity!!

The ThousandWorlds series needs no introduction to SWARS fans, and stories from this series have appeared in a number of zines, including GUARDIAN, SKYWALKER, and past issues of TIME WARP. "A Tale of Two Lukes" appeared in TIME WARP 3, the first part of "That Share of Glory" appeared in TIME WARP 4. The concluding section of "That Share of Glory" is scheduled for TIME WARP 6.

Also with regard to the contents in this ish, two of the stories advertized in our flyer do not appear here. We apologize to our readers, but in both instances the circumstances were beyond our control.

We also extend our apologies to several of our artists. Unfortunately, the triple gods of time, space, and lay-out necessitated our having to leave out some of the art-work done for "The Emperor's Nephew Strikes Back", "New York City Stray", and "Special Modifications."

Time, and space in this editorial column, are quickly running out. Let me see, now. . . is there anything else? Oh yes! If you don't already, (breathes there such a being?), we urge you most definitely to join the official STAR WARS Fan Club, PO Box 8905, Universal City, CA 91608. This is a GOOD thing, with marvelous offers for the fen.

Also, don't miss RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK!! Early previews look fantastic!!!

PAX,
Anne Elizabeth

Anne Elizabeth

COMMUNICATIONS CONTROL

Terri Rogers
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...finished reading TIME
WARP 4, which I picked up at
World Con. Lovely.

I tend to read from cover to cover, in that order, and so I reached "That Share of Glory" last. I was placidly reading along, as I have done with other THOUSANDWORLDS stories. The others I've read dealt more with "Corell" and Han; I disagreed with many of their basic precepts, so I never got too involved in the stories. Also, I prefer somewhat shorter stories than these tend to be. So there I was, all unaware, when suddenly I was--well, thunder-struck is the only word that comes to mind. As far as I am concerned, this is a masterwork, and putting it last in the zine was a stroke of genius.

*

Mary Otten
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Please find some other way of
putting your zine together
than those ghue-awful staples.
I fully appreciate your

efforts to produce quality work at a reasonable cost, but one thing that should never be scrimped on is the binding--especially in a zine as thick as TIME WARP 4. Chasing pages detracts from an enjoyment of one of the better zines around. (Angry subway conductors and foot prints don't help either. Mine fell apart on the LL.)

Second gripe: I do love good calligraphy, and Whitfield's is gorgeous, but I find pages of it hard to read. "The Wit and the Wisdom of the Lords of Kobal" strikes me as a waste of a great talent.

"Revenant" hit me where I live. Just that single, one-page story is worth the entire price of the zine. Han Solo being lost for thirty years is so very probable; it fits right in with the mythic and heroic traditions George Lucas has been molding in STAR WARS. (I want more! The little you let me read ((of the expanded version)) only whet my appetite!)

Is TIME WARP turning into a THOUSANDWORLDS' zine? Two THOUSANDWORLDS stories and one which, even

without the main credit line, seemed to partake of elements of that universe. . . Is "Cat Dancing" a THOUSANDWORLDS story? Or has the author simply accepted the THOUSANDWORLDS background as gospel? (("Cat Dancing" is not a THOUSANDWORLDS story. It makes use of certain THOUSANDWORLDS concepts with the permission of the creators thereto.))

"Cat Dancing" was fun. Will we be seeing more? I got the distinct impression that this story is part of a much larger series. Drusha was too fully realized to be just a passing character. Dispen the Param made a marvelously inept spy. And at last, a female not afraid to make some of the moves; this helps turn "Cat Dancing" into a far more believable "lay-Han" story.

"Fate is the Name" is the best Chewbacca story I've read yet. At last, a wookiee who really is two hundred years old, with all the experience that simply living that long implies. This story fills in Chewbacca's background very creditably. It shows us a Chewie who is gentle and patient (and he must have been, to have spent so many years a slave!), but also amoral enough to suffer no qualms of conscience about entering a pirate's life. I never envisioned Chewbacca as a leader, but "Fate is the Name" convinced me of it. Having him use his size and the wookiee reputation for ferociousness to put over a 'vicious, rampaging wookiee' act is the perfect touch; it adds some humor the story is otherwise lacking. (That is my main difficulty with all the THOUSANDWORLDS stories. They take themselves too seriously. They present too few opportunities to laugh. "Cat Dancing" does not carry this fault, though otherwise it echoes across the THOUSANDWORLDS universe.)

"That Share of Glory" almost sinks under its own weight. It is good: well-written, full of personal conflict, better than many pro books I've read. Arde-wan Kenobi's self-delusions about his son, and his being less than overjoyed at the boy's Jedi leanings, foreshadow Owen Lars's attitude about Luke, the older Obi-Wan, and 'damndest crusades'. Nowakowska has taken this attitude toward the Jedi and their goals to its logical conclusion--and I wish she hadn't. If a story can suffer from an intrusion of too much

reality, this one does. I would like a little more laughter, a little more 'gee-willikers-wonderfulness', and it's just not there. The THOUSANDWORLDS writers are chronicling a tragedy, a Greek tragedy at that. They know how their heroes will die and it covers all their work with gloom. As terrible as things get in STARWARS and in EMPIRE, there is always a glimpse of humor, there is always hope. When Chewbacca and Lando go to rescue Han at the end of EMPIRE, I know they'll succeed. If it were a THOUSANDWORLDS tale, I'd start to worry.

"Arika" is another excellent story, and a truly unusual STAR TREK story, to boot. "What-if-Kirk-failed?" stories have been done to death, but never like this. Bravo! Kirk falling, but going on to give his captain, Spock, his full loyalty fits the men I remember from the series. An interesting twist, having Kirk the lieutenant commander and Spock the captain. I don't think any other story has placed Kirk second to Spock and kept them believable. Kirk tends to snatch jealously at command.

"A Long Time Ago. . ." What can I say? I love ((first season)) Buck Rogers and have seen far too little of it, since I work Thursday evenings. You know I'm crazy about STAR WARS. The two together is sheer heaven. Adsit's Buck & Co. are very true to form. However, her Luke and Leia, what little is seen of them, come over like a couple of overactive kids. Her own STAR WARS people are handled so much better--what happened?

Yasner has a warped sense of humor. I had a few good laughs out of "Bedroom Farce". In reality, however, I think that, after EMPIRE, Leia would be more likely to take a blaster to Vader, than Vader to her bed.

(Random observation on Solo: he is a smell noticer, isn't he? Trash mashers and tauntauns. This after seeing EMPIRE for the fifth time.)

"Prologue". . . December 1977? Did you have a premonition? Or a friend of a friend of a third cousin working in Lucas's office? That last verse really hits so closely to the mark, it's uncanny!

*

Becky Aulenbach
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I've been wanting to write for ages to tell you how much I enjoyed reading TIME WARP 3. The writing and the artwork is superb, the two stories that stick out in my mind being Yaz's "Cats in the Dark" and Nowakowska's "A Tale of Two Lukes". Then, of course, there's Matthew's "Soliloquy", but I've been a fan of her poetry for so long that it doesn't surprise me she's produced another winner.

Hans Dietrich's and Carrie Rowles's art work has knocked me for a loop; it's simply fantastic. Rowles's "Darth-in-a-Bathtub" scene left me in stitches. And only a Vader fan can appreciate the illos that Dietrich did for Yasner's story.

All in all, I'd say that TIME WARP 3 is one of the "must have" zines in STAR WARS fandom. I don't know about other people, but I myself appreciate how sturdily it's put together. I'm rather rough on

zines, liking to read and re-read them until they start to shed pages like fall leaves, but after months of handling, my copy of TIME WARP 3 hasn't even shed one staple!

*

Gerry Stout
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. . . TIME WARP 4 is lovely, just wonderful! I like the wide-ranging subject matter, as I've said before. The professional quality of your zine in in sharp contrast to ((others)) I have seen recently. Your obvious care shines. I will admit that the small print is a bit difficult at times, but that's MY eyesight problem...

I had total hysterics over the ALIEN segment! It was inspired. (Do I, or do I not, detect a certain feeling of THE PINK PANTHER about it?)

I, also, have a friend who pointed out that it was obvious that there had to be a gap in time between 'that first paralyzing kiss' and the cloud city. . . Leia being pregnant is highly amusing and, to cop a phrase from Spock, highly logical. . .

*

Chris Callahan
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I'll start with the cover: stunning! Congratulations to Carol Walske on a truly lovely piece of work. But I do wish you'd use larger staples--I had to restaple the back cover, and am not expecting even my repair job to hold very long.

Now to the stories: Kirkland's "Fate is the Name" is excellent. I've read other background stories on Chewbacca, and this is by far the best, as a story and as characterization. Is there any chance the THOUSANDWORLD Stories will be collected--Nowakowska's and Kirkland's with Kowalski illos? (Yes, I know Nowakowska and Kowalski are the same person.)

Hans Dietrich's "ALIEN Folio" is a delight--if I ever get around to seeing the movie again I think I'll be seeing Hans's interpretation and laughing all through it!

Karen Osman's "Taken at the Flood" is maybe not the best written story I've ever read, but as a story it's fine. She did a good job of getting inside a trooper's skin, I think. There are too many Darth Vader stories around--about time somebody showed the Imperial cannon fodder's point of view.

Naturally I loved Matthews' "Cat Dancing"--I don't think I've read a dud by Matthews yet. Thera's a delightful creature. I do feel sorry for Han--almost! Balkney's deception concerning the rekchip is almost as funny as the bar scene where Han "kidnapped" Thera. Now there's a scene I'd love to see in 70mm! Gelt's casual reaction is so perfect! Too bad Martynn's illos aren't quite up to the story. The best is on page 72; the others are too static, and Han's face is obviously taken from photos. But the one on p. 72 is beautiful.

"Bedroom Farce" wasn't particularly funny.

"The Promise"--not exactly original, and frankly, I think it's unrealistic. If the Alliance has to wait till Leia's child grows up, at least to midteens, it can't possibly hold out long enough for the kid to get necessary training, even if the training begins in infancy. The Emperor's too strong. It's much more likely the Other is someone already involved, like Leia herself--or, as a friend has suggested (and come up with convincing arguments for), even Han. "Revenant" is better as a story and more believable, assuming my friend is wrong about Han!

Nowakowska's "That Share of Glory" is great--of course, it's Nowakowska. Really, if Lucasfilm doesn't hire her, they're absolutely insane.

All in all, a fine issue, people. Keep it up!

*

Barbara Brayton
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The cover of TIME WARP 4 is certainly beautiful--those colors seem to just leap off the page! I just hope this one holds

together better than #3 (Hear me, baby? Hold together!)

I couldn't agree with you more about EMPIRE. I've seen it ten-times-going-on-eleven and still I find things I hadn't noticed before. I, too, am impressed by the Walkers. Their animal-like movements are fascinating. But for me, the asteroid field is the most exciting. I love to see Han fly that ship! What I love most about EMPIRE is the closeness that has developed between Han, Luke, Leia, and Chewie. I truly believe that, despite all the grim happenings in the film, we can take heart from their loyalty and devotion to each other. Their time is coming. I'm very optimistic and looking forward to the next film.

It's great to see two THOUSANDWORLDS stories in this issue. "Fate is the Name" was excellent. It's good to get some background on Chewbacca, and this dovetails nicely with "The Reluctant Rebel" ((GUARDIAN 2)). Chewie certainly has been around. No wonder he thinks of Han as a mere "pup". I would, too, with two hundred years of experience behind me. Of course, Han would not see the relationship in quite the same way, but from Chewie's point of view, twenty-five years is a mere drop in the bucket.

"Cat Dancing" was a very well-written story. I've always liked Susan Matthews' work. Han's gentleness with Thera was very touching. That's my Han! The love-making scene was very nicely done, and the ending was a riot. Of all the illos, the one on page 72 is my favorite.

"The Promise" touches on something very dear to me. Nothing would please me more than for Leia to be carrying Han's child, whether it was the Other or not. They are very much in love, and I hope to see them married and raising a family. "Revenant" really broke my heart, until I had thought about it a while. It's like the problem with long space voyages: everyone and everything has changed but you. The readjustment problems would be tremendous, but I know Han is not a quitter. He could and would adjust and adapt

and make a new life for himself. These people obviously care very much for Han or they would not have spent thirty years searching for him.

"That Share of Glory" was beautiful, and so touching it made me cry. I can certainly understand Arde-Wan's fears for his son; all parents fear for their children, but in this case it's even greater, because Arde-Wan recognizes the gifts the boy has. There will be a follow-up story to this, I assume?

As to what I would like to see in future issues, I hope you will continue to print THOUSAND-WORLDS stories, so I can keep my collection complete. I would also like to see you expand on "Revenant" and "The Promise", and of course I would like to see more post-TESB stories, especially about Han and Leia.

*

Tim Blaes
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All in all, TIME WARP 4 is one of the finest looking zines I've seen so far. Any chance of my buying

copies of numbers 1-3? ((Sorry, those zines are effectively out-of-print.))

"The Promise" and "Revenant" were two perfect gems. More! In "The Promise", who was the father, Han or Luke? (It must have been a long time between the asteroid field and Bespin. Who knows what could have happened?) I would like to see more stories about Leia. She's been getting bad press of late, and I don't think she deserves it.

Maybe this would be asking for trouble, but why not produce a one-shot zine featuring the female of the species: Leia, Wilma Deering, Uhura, and so on. And don't just ask for contributions. Go out and solicit them actively from fan writers you know and whose work you enjoy. If all else fails, write the stories yourself. It's time for the women to strike back! And you don't have to be a woman to enjoy the fray.

"Hazardman" should get his own fanzine.

Susan Matthews has the delightful tendency to steam my glasses up. "Cat Dancing" could have been a farce, but she pulled it off masterfully. I know she can do more than send my hormones zinging, as she has proven in the past. But she surely knows how to titillate a reader, if only subliminally. Someone should turn her purple pen in the direction of a certain 'inexperienced' farmboy and/or a very proper princess. Han can't have all the fun.

More Hans Dietrich, and more of his ALIEN. 'Nuff said.

*

Polly Muelenberg
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The first thing that strikes you about TIME WARP 4 is the cover; Walske's dynamic design with its use of bold colors is one of the best. Can't say anything about the backcover, as the zine fell apart and I seem to have misplaced it. Now, this is no big criticism--they all

do; it's almost expected.

I absolutely loved "Fate is the Name. . .". Normally I don't care for single character stories (unless they're about Han Solo), but this intrigued me no end. The only thing wrong with it was that it was underwritten, and not long enough! Kirkland has an excellent feel for creating settings and making them believable.

I'm a great fan of Susan Matthews, and have a terrible time keeping track of her work. Susan has a feel for her material that translates well to the reader (at least, to me). Liked the character Thera, but Dispen. . . Well, the idea was good, but I can't believe he'd be that stupid. I realize Susan needed the device in order to have Han rescue the dancer, but it's still a gimmick. And what happened at the end? Where's she go? Hunh? Martynn's art was superb; those on pages 63 and 70 were especially so.

Howlett's "Street Punk" was a pleasant surprise. Rather than the expected cliché, the story was a skillful and deceptively simple piece of writing.

"Promise" cracked me up! It's so logical! Mary Cascio and the group were here when the zine arrived, and it just blew us away! What a thought! And "Revenant"--what can be said? Very moving.

I am a devotee of the THOUSANDWORLDS Chronicles, and while it didn't pick up after the last installment in SKYWALKER, I wasn't disappointed. Maggie's imagination and skillful storytelling are awesome.

Sorry to say, I'm not fond of poetry, and don't feel qualified to judge.

While I like Dietrich's art, the ALIEN subject bores me, so maybe I shouldn't criticize ((the portfolio)). "Taken at the Flood" just didn't hold my attention, but the artwork was excellent. Whitfield does wonderful calligraphy, but I thought that, in this instance, "The Book of the Word" was a waste of paper. Yasner's "Bedroom Farce" was. . . well, I read somewhere that once you accept the premise it's funny, but really, Yaz could find something else. For some reason I couldn't get into "Arika" or the Buck Rogers/STAR WARS story (but I'm waiting for the "new" Buck Rogers to meet the Cylons. . .).

Pat O'Neill's "Adventures of Chris Sheridan" absolutely disgusted me for no objective reason--purely subjective. I owned a comix/SF store for two years and am thoroughly sickened at the sight of anything resembling "The Shadow", "The Spirit", and so forth. I didn't appreciate seeing it in a ST/SW zine. As I said, it's not a rational comment and shouldn't be constructed as a put-down.

All in all, a good zine and well worth the wait and the price.

*

Michelle Quesnell
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Canada T6H 3K6

You asked for it, you got: an LOC for TIME WARP 3. I've gone through from beginning to end, as if I were reading it for the

first time, instead of the fiftieth.

I didn't care for "Invocation" and "From the Jedi Vow" for reasons which have nothing to do with the excellence of Whitfield's calligraphy or the quality of Varesano's writing; I'm simply not that hooked into Jedi philosophy, or Ben Kenobi. The illos were both good--I did a drawing something like Carrock's myself, though not half as well, and was interested to see that it could be made to work out after all. I feel constrained to say that I regard both these pieces as chants, rather than poems, because they lack the imagery and life which it's my understanding poetry should possess. However, from the titles, I presume this is also the author's view of them.

Hill's "Before the Fall" is nicely crafted, as all of her work is. I'm always suspicious of rhyming verse-forms, but Kelly has done this very well: the rhythm flows effortlessly, and she hasn't had to reach for rhymes. The rhyming form, in effect, does not distract from the meaning of the poem, or from the reader's absorption with it. Someone should set this to music.

More "Sacred Writings"--please see my first comments. "Sacred writings" are like salt: excellent as an addition to almost anything, but tending to spoil the soup if sprinkled too heavily.

"Interstellar Traffic Jam" was cute. Crowded, but cute.

I liked "The Challenge". It's an interesting speculation on Kenobi's comment about Vader murdering Skywalker Senior. I particularly liked the opening passages wherein Vader is (rather childish) resentful of the Master's attentions to the more malleable students. Again, I think it could have been done as prose, but I liked it.

Rowles's "Rubber Ducky Vader" was lovely (nice boots!), but I wish someone had caught "your the one" before it went to press.

I loved "The Cinninnatus Caper". You've caught Han beautifully, and the whole business of the entry into Jabba's presence and the subliminal projector was very interesting. I have one question: why doesn't Antibe, who obviously has brains, take over Jabba's operation and get rid of the old tub of lard? I want to know what happens next. Your ending was tantalizing in the extreme--Han is obviously trying to reassure himself, as well as Chewie. How does it all work out?

More sacred writings. Hmmm.

"Desert Wind, Death Wind" is the best piece of blank verse so far! It degenerates out of pure poetry into narrative in the third stanza, but the ghostly quality of the ending redeems it. The illustration is very good. Full of loneliness and harsh contrasts and the coming of night.

"Battle Prayer" reads very well and is, I think, Varesano's best piece in TIME WARP 3. I didn't care for the illo on the facing page, but couldn't have done it better. 'Nuff said.

"End. . . And Beginning" puzzles me. "Darth!

My son!"??? I see it primarily as a narrative without life, without sensory detail, without much interest. So the Sith Lord heard the psychic deaths of ten thousand men. So what? What the hell does that sound like?

Yasner's "Cats in the Dark", on the other hand, is a masterpiece. I loved her description of the lovemaking and Kass and Darth's mutual struggle against the great god Respirator. Many writers have tried to humanize Darth, but this is the first time I've felt it worked. I wondered, however, if Darth would have withdrawn so completely from her. Of course, he doesn't want to seem too human, but I'd have thought he'd be a little more forthcoming than he's portrayed here. That line about knowing her name and where she lives sounds almost like a threat! However, the attitude is nicely explained, and this is a quibble on my part. Hans Dietrich's illos are, of course, fabulous. The ending of the story is quite a letdown and I'd like to know if Darth sees her again.

"Hey, Babe. . ." is a nice cartoon. Love that girl's expression!

"Souvenirs of Alderaan" is good, with reservations. I was intrigued by Adsit's idea that Han loves free-fall. It's a logical extension of his love of piloting, and I liked the idea that he wishes he had someone to share it with. However, I think Jack Tarr was a bit much, and the whole character of Aithne was just a little too precocious to be believable. The idea of Han salvaging pieces of Alderaan is perfect: it's just what he would do. What would Leia think? The illos in my copy were quite blobby, so they didn't look too great. No doubt the originals were much better.

"Soliloquy" by Susan Matthews is easily my favorite piece in the whole zine. She captures Han so perfectly: the nostalgia Han feels, triggered by Luke's excitement, is so beautifully expressed, and the melancholy of having to come to earth when all he and his "battered baby" want to do is soar is so wonderful. Han's gained some distance from the kind of excitement Luke feels, and that's rather sad, too. It's all about compromises, and coming to terms with what you can get, and understanding that sometimes you have to do things you're not really proud of so you can be where you need to be. I can't rave enough about this poem.

"A Tale of Two Lukes" is a good, well-written story, as all the THOUSANDWORLDS stories are. I am not deeply enamored of the Whills, so I was not wild about it. I did like the meeting of the Whills with Han Solo--two abrasive personalities coming together! Maggie Nowakowska/Pam Kowalski should be a professional; I don't know what she does for a living, but if she's not a writer she's depriving the world. The same goes for Susan Matthews. I understand they are roommates--the creative energies floating around their place must be tremendous!

"Knight and Dragon: Quest" could have been prose.

"After the Revolution" frightened me, because it could quite easily happen. Luke, with his idealism and relative inexperience of life, might come to see Han as an undesirable. And you know, Han wouldn't be

any more law abiding under Alliance rule than Imperial rule; it would be a pretty problem if the Alliance wins. But what a heart-breaking situation for Han to find himself in, and how well the author expresses it!

"Shackled Spirit" is another version of the same situation, beautifully done by Kelly Hill. I particularly liked ". . . Silver star-bird/destroyed beyond hope/and I, no better. . ." and "my severed form". That's what imagery is all about.

Reviews usually bore or annoy me, but nothing Paula Block writes is ever boring, and I happened to agree with her: why should a wookiee find Dihnann Carroll erotically attractive? I'm not wildly turned on by Chewie, although the idea has its amusing aspects. . . I liked Martynn's illo, too, but then, I always like Martynn's illos. I like her Han-drawings better, but that's because I'm addicted to Han.

So that's it. It's taken me a whole Saturday morning to do this, and I've consumed about half a gallon of tea, so I'm going to close now. Quickly.

*

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I like the idea of having LOCs in TIME WARP 4. It is always very interesting to read what other people have to say, even if they have violently different opinions than your own. Sometimes they can even make you see a story in an entirely new light. By all means, please continue.

Everything in the issue was very high quality, although I didn't like any of the poetry as well as some in earlier issues; maybe it just didn't hit me right this time.

"Fate is the Name" dragged a bit, but it was well worth reading. I admire people who are willing to tackle wookiees, because they really have so little material to work with from the films that they have to have quite a bit of imagination. I tend to ignore the TV Special, which I consider a gross ripoff and an insult to the original. I liked the idea that Chewie had a life of his own before meeting Han, and enjoyed following his adventures. I also thought the author did a good job of characterizing him, although not as good a job of making him truly alien as "Rites of Passage" in PEGASUS IV.

"An ALIEN Folio" was a pure delight, absolutely marvelous. Even though I haven't seen the movie, I think it was my favorite thing in the issue. The drawing was excellent, and I laughed all the way through it, and as far as I'm concerned the artist can to right on wasting time drawing that ugly monster for as long as he wants.

"Cat Dancing" was a very pleasant little story, and Thera was well characterized. I found "Street Punk" rather pointless, but I don't think I was really trying hard enough. As for Yasner's, ah, thing: Oh, dear, what can I say? I really hate to see poor Darth humiliated like that, even at friendly hands (at least, the writer's were friendly. . .). But it was funny, and the last line was hilarious: I've often wondered just what those buttons do myself. Treated seriously,

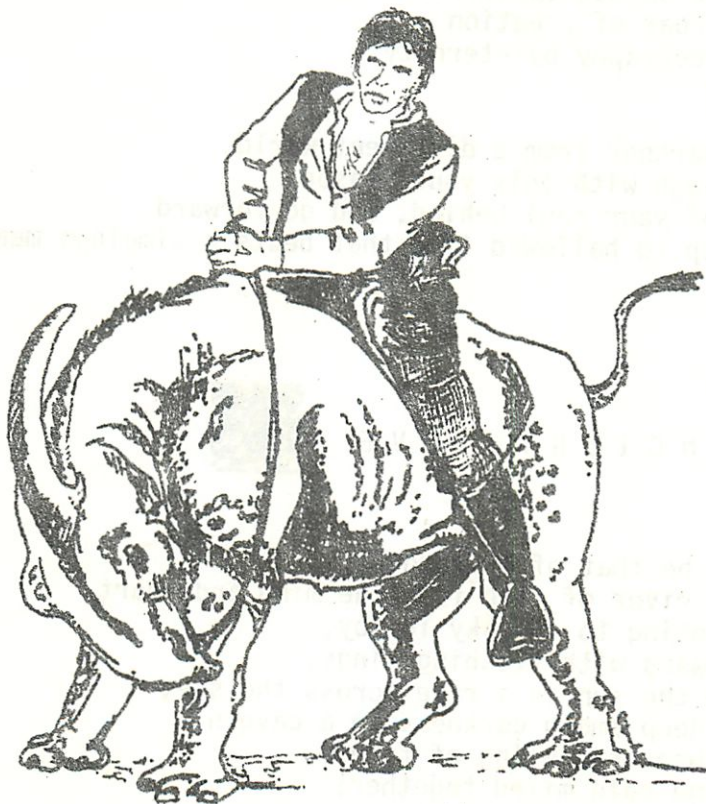
the basic idea of a political marriage between Darth and Leia to fight the Emperor is very interesting and actually rather plausible, given the iron will and dedication of the two parties. I think they are really more alike than either is willing to admit, which is probably why they hate each other so. Or rather, why Leia hates Vader. I'm not so sure he hates her; actually, I'd be willing to believe, as Joyce says, that Vader actually admires Leia and would be quite willing to like her given the chance. In any case, he is the only character in the movie who is man enough to tame her, though Solo is quite good enough as a lover and partner for her. Certainly, Vader gave no evidence in the movies of treating Leia with anything other than respect for a worthy opponent, as one aristocrat to another. For, after all, they are both nobility and understand one another's background, while both Luke and Han are commoners.

I liked "Arika" and thought the idea was intriguing, but on most ST stuff I have to say "No comment". Ditto for Sheryl Adsit's story: it was well-written, I couldn't have any complaints there, but I usually dislike cross-universe stories--not always, there have been exceptions. In any case, I loathe Buck Rogers and his obnoxious little droids (God, they're even worse than C3PO and R2D2, and that's saying something!), so I can hardly be impartial towards this story. I consider the TV Buck Rogers a smartass macho creep with all of Han Solo's faults and absolutely none of his (many) redeeming qualities. I could go on at length about how truly repulsive I found him, but I think you get my drift.

"That Share of Glory" was a fine story in the child-prodigy tradition about that Tricky Dick Nixon of the spaceways, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The only fault I have to find in Maggie's writing style is a tendency to ramble on verbosely; I think most of her stories would be improved by a bit of tightening up on the action. However, when she got to the point, it was very effective. I think she is really a novelist in disguise, and perhaps all these interrelated stories will become one major work sometime in the future (if they do, I'll certainly buy it).

Finally, "The Promise" and "Revenant": both are thought-provoking, although I don't think either will be borne out in the third movie. I, personally, don't think the "other" Yoda is talking about is Leia's child; I think it is another hope, not another person. With absolutely no evidence to support my theory whatever, I'll plug my favorite character into the slot, and say that it would be nice if it meant Vader and the Alliance Jedi could come to some sort of accommodation and restore the Order to peace, to reunite the yin and the yang of the universe into a whole. If Luke can be "turned", maybe Vader can be also, and the two can meet at some point. There is no reason why this should be, however, and we'll just have to wait for III. The idea of Han being awakened years after everyone he has known is dead sets up very interesting possibilities, and I would like to see you flesh it out into a complete story.

So there you are, a very quick comment on the material in TIME WARP IV.



Many thanks for all your LOCs. We also heard from: Marjorie Cleghorn, Leigh Zavakos, Pat Marx, Beverly Bishop, Sharon Dickerson, Gail Weiss, Susan Doelling, Karen Swanson, and--with all our thanks, and apologies for not including it here--Martijn.

C O S M I C D A N C E

Quasars beating in three-four time,
expanding the mind to all limits.
Pain universal and beauty inward;
pain is good for the soul, so extend yourself.

Join hands, and step to the music,
pulsing to the heart of the galaxy.
Bow to your partner,
(and then, perhaps, to Cause)
Dance along the star-strewn way.



Whirling, we dance,
--jerked by our puppet strings.

Pain,
Expansion,
we spread ourselves so thin.
Dance to the roar of creation
--choreography by eternity.

Choose your partner from a different world,
and laugh with only your reason.
Leave moths of your soul behind, and go forward
To step to hallowed time that beats a timeless measure.

A N C I E N T L O V E



Let all love be that of a dragon's;
Deep flowing river of fire from the mind and heart,
Brassy trumpeting to the sky in joy,
To writhe upward with flashing wings,
Outstripping the sun in a race across the sky,
Or sounding deep among darkness in a cavern.
Creature or feeling of fire,
Hot and cold mixed together;
Fighting all the knights of reason,
Which should win or lose?

Geraldine Stout.

THE EMPEROR'S NEPHEW STRIKES BACK

"Okay, kid." Han Solo checked his watch, glanced down the alley. "Meet you back here at 16:21--and I don't mean 16:22. And look, kid--"

Luke nodded earnestly. "I'll be here, Han. And will you stop fussing? I can take care of myself."

"In a pig's eye," Han muttered. He slapped Luke on the back and they both set off, Han to swagger out of the alley, ostentatiously eyeing several passing women, and Luke to head cautiously toward the Justinian military complex.

As he walked along, Luke began to feel more and more as if eyes--hundreds of eyes--were following his every move. There--that girl was staring right at him! Luke hunched his shoulders and pulled his cap down further. He began mentally repeating his instructions.

Go to the West Gate of the Justinian complex. Wait. Our agent will come by and pass you the information. The password is-- Luke sidestepped just in time to avoid a passing sidewalk vendor and cart. He sighed, and grimly plodded on. No matter what Han said--and the Corellian said quite a lot--Luke was beginning to suspect that Captain Han Solo enjoyed these stupid cloak-and-dagger missions. But with every trip, Luke became more and more convinced that spying was NOT his idea of a good time. It was too sneaking, somehow, and he was no good at it, no matter what Le--

A flurry of movement, loud cries of alarm. Luke looked up just in time to see a groundcar plunging across the plaza, straight at him. He jumped aside. The quick reflexes of

youth saved him--almost. The side of the onrushing car sent him spinning. A smashing blow on his head sent him further, into blackness.



"Hey, Lucius--catch!"

Lucius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus Palpatine whirled just in time to have the wineskin hit him in the chest. He grabbed it before more than a glassful spilled, held it up to let some of the golden liquid spill into his mouth, and tossed it back, laughing. "This place is getting dull. I'm for the Smuggler's Inn and some hot wenches and cold liquor. Who's with me?"

There was a distinctly uneasy pause from his companions. Lucius stood arrogantly, lamplight turning his blond hair to gold and his blue eyes to sapphire. "What, none of my gallant comrades in arms, so to speak? Cowards all?"

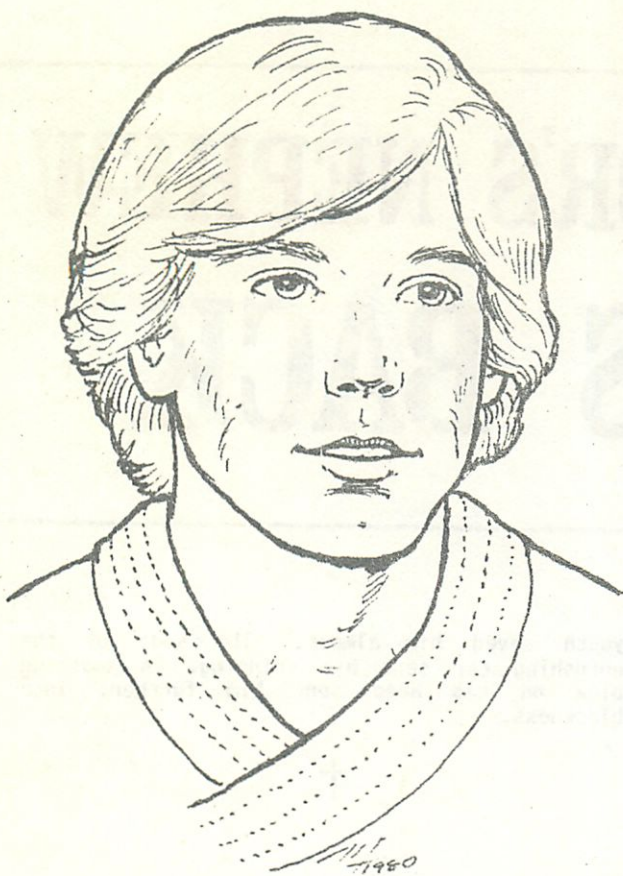
"Highness, you can't go there."

"Can't?" Lucius said, with a lift of his eyebrows and a sardonic smile that sat oddly on his youthfully open face.

"It's too dangerous. Your uncle--"

"My uncle isn't here--thank the Maker. Now, are any of you craven courtlings accompanying me or not?"

A SATIRE by BARBARA WENK



His whoring and drinking companions looked even less enthusiastic, if possible. One stepped forward, put his hand on Lucius's arm. "We don't dare, Lucius. This is slumming, but down to Smuggler's Inn--that's crazy. It's too dangerous."

"You don't dare," Lucius mocked, shaking off the hand. "Well, my fine friends, I do." He strode to the door of the bar. "Farewell--I'll see you at the palace. Eventually." With an airy wave of his hand, he was gone.

When his friends came to the realization that, if anything happened to him, they were in for it, they dashed out to the ill-lit street. Too late. Lucius, the Emperor Palpatine's rakehell nephew and heir to the throne of the Empire, had already disappeared into night's blackness.



Damn his hide, the kid was late. "I'll kill 'im," Han said. "This time I'll bloody kill 'im." Luke should have been back almost an hour ago. Unless something had happened to him. But this was a milk run, simplicity itself. What the hell could've happened?

"Bet he loused it up six ways from--" Han shook his head. Checking his blaster, he started back the alley. All right, he'd just have to go find the blasted kid. It was stupid, and against all procedure and common sense. Dangerous. "But not as dangerous as goin' back and tellin' 'er Worship I've lost Luke."

In fact, Han didn't have far to go. In the next dim alley, he sighted a lighter blotch. Intuition told him his search was over--it figured the kid had gotten himself bonked within shouting distance of the meeting point.

Han carefully went up to check. Luke, all right--but where the hell had he changed clothes? And why, for hell's black sake? Shaking his head, Han knelt and laid a gentle hand on Luke's forehead. Out cold, poor kid.

"Don't like to move ya, kid, but it can't be helped," Han said. They had to get back to the *Falcon* and split for home rebel base.



Lucius swam back to consciousness with difficulty. It was a long and wearying effort. By the time he was awake, he wanted only to go to sleep again. But there was a cool hand on his face, and an insistent voice calling him. A soft, urgent voice.

There was another voice, too, this one harder, deeper. Male, with overtones of careless devilry and a strong undercurrent of concern. "Forget it, Your Worship. He's been out since I picked him out of that trash pile on Remus. Y'know, if we could just keep the kid out of garbage--"

"Shut up, Han." It was the woman's voice again. "Luke. Luke--"

Lucius made one last colossal effort and opened his eyes. His vision was blurred, but he could still tell a pretty woman when he saw one. "'service, m'lady.'" Ah, what a lovely smile she had, the little Leia--

Leia Organa? Lucius tried to sit up, and fell back.

"Easy, kid," said the man, moving forward to catch him and lower him gently to the bunk. "Save the heroics. We're home."

"Yes." Leia's hand was on his head again. "The doctor's coming, Luke--"

"Luke?" Lucius said fuzzily. His head hurt dreadfully--he was going to be out cold again in another minute. He grabbed Leia's wrist, holding tight. "I'm Luke?"

"Yes," she said soothingly. "Now rest, Luke. Rest."

All right, my rebel princess. I'll be your Luke...until I'm well enough to smash this secret base and take you back in golden chains....

"Sleep, Luke."

"Rebels," Lucius said. And obeyed Leia's command.

†

Luke woke with an effort. It was a battle to force his heavy eyes open. By the time he was awake, he didn't know why he'd bothered to fight up out of that soft, comfortable pit of black. But there was a cool hand on his face, and an insistent voice calling him. A soft, urgent voice.

"Your Highness. Your Highness."

Huh? Luke frowned. They weren't calling him, then. He could go back to that quiet dark--

"Lucius." A man's voice now. Deep, concerned. "Lucius, wake up."

Maybe that was him? Luke struggled, opened his eyes. His vision blurred, cleared. There was a pretty woman in white bending over him. *Leia?* his fogged mind said instantly. Beside her, a middle-aged man, his face deeply lined, his dark eyes sad and kind. For an insane instant, Luke thought it was Uncle Owen. He tried to sit up, and fell back.

"Easy, my boy." The man moved to catch him, lowering him gently to the bed. "No need of your insane gallantries now. You're home. In the hospital. Lucius--"

"Lucius?" said Luke foggily. His head hurt dreadfully, as did his ribs, his arms, his whole body. He reached out. The man promptly held his hand tightly, reassuringly. Luke clung to him. "I'm Lucius?"

"Yes," the man said soothingly. "Now rest, Lucius. The doctors say you must rest."

Okay. Yeah, I'll rest. But-- Some of the fog lifted from Luke's aching brain. My God--it's the Emperor! Palpatine! Just like the newstapes--

"Sleep, Lucius," Palpatine said.

As Luke stared, the woman moved. Luke felt a sting on his arm, heard a tiny hissing. Sleepy, yes...

"Emperor," Luke said. And perforce obeyed Palpatine's command.

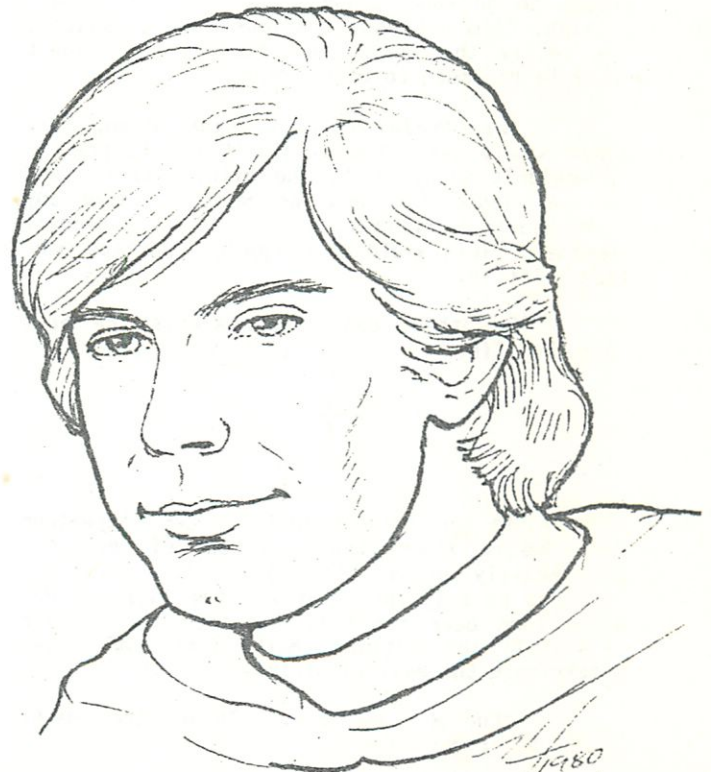
The next time Lucius awoke, he was lying in a bed in a spartan, sun-filled room. It was a few moments before the events of the past few--what, hours? Days?--clarified. The last thing he remembered was a dark alley, a bewitching gypsy-girl face--

Caught like any back-world hick, he thought in disgust, touching his head gingerly. Then dark, then light and another woman's face-- Now he had it. The traitor Leia Organa. The notorious rebel princess. And he must be on the rebels' base.

What a priceless opportunity! Inside the super-secret hidden base-- Lucius glanced around the room and smiled again. And there she was, the petted, spoiled darling of the Organas, sitting in a straight-back chair, regarding him gravely.

"Oh, Luke," she said, rising and moving to the bedside. "You're awake. We've been so worried. Do you feel all right?"

She was standing close, staring right at his face. Lucius searched her features carefully. He saw only worry, dawning relief, affection. The slight smile on his tanned face widened. Well, there was no reason to suppose she'd recognize him. He'd been at school much of the time she's been at the Imperial Court. She thought he was someone called Luke.



Simple enough, Lucius decided. He'd tread warily, of course. "Leia?"

Her face was radiant with joy. "Oh, thank the Maker. You know me."

"Of course I know you." Lucius kept his voice tentative. He might have to lean heavily on 'amnesia' in the immediate future.

"Han and I have been so--" Leia shook her head, her dark braids swinging.

"Han?" Lucius took a quickly-calculated gamble. "He's all right?"

Leia nodded. "He always is, isn't he? Let me call him in. He wanted to see your recovery for himself."

'Han' proved to be the slightly-raffish looking man who'd been present the first time Lucius had regained consciousness. After a brief but enthusiastic visit, a doctor came into the room and firmly chased both princess and pirate out, leaving Lucius in blessed privacy.

So I'm now Luke Skywalker, am I? Well, well, well. Lucius settled back on the pillows, hands behind his blond head. His blue eyes were dreamy. A sardonic smile curved his mouth. *Yes, I do rather think I can manage. He seems a simple enough chap, from all the evidence.*

All he had to do was keep his mouth shut. Since he'd be damned if he'd be stupid enough to go running around a rebel stronghold yelling, "I'm not your precious Luke Skywalker, I'm really the Grand Duke Lucius," he didn't think he had much to worry about.

Yes, Uncle mine. I think we may have these rebels yet. Lucius didn't try to pretend he wouldn't enjoy it to the hilt, either. And now, at last, for once he wouldn't have any faint-hearts trying to curb his daredevil impulses. This would be dangerous, perhaps more than a little.

But then, danger was always the best spice to life.

†

In the Imperial palace, Luke Skywalker had come to almost the same sort of decision. Lean heavily on the blow to his head to cover any gaps or slip-ups, that was the ticket. Han would come back for him, and then they'd have invaluable information. Maybe Luke could even assassinate the evil Palpatine--

"Lucius, my boy. Thank the Maker you're all right now."

Luke sat up with a jerk that sent a throb through his head. The Emperor! "Uh, sir, uh, I--" Damn it, he was a rebel. He shouldn't be impressed by a "living representative of a

degenerate society," as the last pamphlet had so cogently put it.

Palpatine was standing close beside Luke's bed. The Emperor's lined face reflected no evil. Nor could Luke feel any stirring of it in the vaguenesses of the Force. There was only lingering worry, dawning relief, deep affection.

Shame sent hot color flaming to Luke's cheeks. How could he seriously be thinking of murdering this man in cold blood? *I'm as bad as any Imperial!*

"No, don't. You need not explain to me." Palpatine's voice was fond, a little rueful. "But, Lucius, this must stop. This time you were lucky. You're still alive." Now Palpatine's face seemed to harden, his voice forceful, commanding. "Lucius, you're the next Emperor. You cannot risk your life for minor debaucheries. It isn't yours to throw away."

"Oh," said Luke cautiously. He'd only just stopped himself from prompt acquiescence to whatever the Emperor'd just said. Well brought up, Luke was trained to respond to that particular note in an adult's voice.

"Yes," the Emperor said. "I'm sorry, Lucius. I love you as my own son, and therefore would not see you dead on my own account."

"Thank you," Luke mumbled after an awkward pause. "Sir."

Palpatine smiled and laid a hand on Luke's shoulder. "I know. Young blood runs hot, and yours hotter than most. You're the living image of your father, and he--" He broke off, shaking his head.

Father? Luke stared at the Emperor, hoping no more relatives of Lucius were going to appear. "My father?"

Palpatine seemed to be gazing into space. "Damn you, Drusus-- Never mind my boy. The less said, the better, as well we all know. Now, you're to rest. And I to leave, before that officious doctor comes to bundle me out. All the same, these physicians."

Smiling, Palpatine patted Luke's shoulder and left. Luke stared at the door. *Han, what'm I going to do? Impersonate a prince?*

That's right, said a tiny voice in his mind. Or were you planning to walk up to the Emperor and say, "Hi, I'm Luke Skywalker and I'm a rebel"?

Luke sighed and leaned back on the pillows. More spying. More subtleties that always made him nervous. No Han, no Leia, no Chewie. Just one very inadequate Luke Skywalker.

"Aw shit," said Luke. He had a very bad feeling about this whole thing.

†



It was simplicity itself for Lucius to slide into place as Luke Skywalker. His double seemed to have been a shy but popular figure, and all Lucius had to do was be reticent and polite. He thought he was doing it quite well, and was only sorry his uncle wasn't there to be impressed--or perhaps astounded would be closer to the mark.

As Luke, Lucius had the free run of the rebel complex. In the past week, he'd amassed enough information to put a stop to half the rebel activities in the Empire, once he got it to the proper authorities. And he'd have still more before he stole one of their ships and headed home.

"Luke!"

Lucius stopped his intent scrutiny of the weaponry in the landing area below. Turning, he leaned casually and elegantly against the waist-high railing. "Hello-- Hi, Leia."

Leia came up to lean on the railing beside him. Lucius smiled down at her, care-

fully schooling the expression on his face. This was the main reason he hadn't yet taken off home out of sheer boredom with the role of Luke Skywalker. *Dear Leia. When I leave this godforsaken planet, I go with a souvenir. A little present for my uncle.*

"You look so thoughtful, Luke." Leia grinned up at him, pushing back a vagrant strand of her brown hair. "Credit for them?"

"You'd be overcharged," he said. Damn, that was probably too witty for Luke. "That is, I--" Let her finish for him, then.

"Oh, Luke. Don't worry about that mission. Han went back and picked up the information once he'd gotten you here. He landed last night, late."

"Oh, good." Lucius continued to study Leia's upturned face. His expression was intent, almost smoldering. He gave it another three seconds before it made her uncomfortable.

After a moment, Leia ducked her head, looked away.

"Leia?" Lucius said, his voice almost a caress.

She glanced quickly back up at him. Lucius allowed no further sign of sensual interest to show. A little confusion would be good for her.

She blushed, "I--I have to go. I'm already a bit late. A conference with Dodonna."

"I'll see you later, then." Lucius watched her walk off. He allowed a grin to curve his mouth. Much later, and on his terms.

Lucius deliberately did not put in an appearance at dinner that evening. Later, he tapped at Leia's door.

"Luke, where have you been? Why weren't you at dinner?"

"I went to find you a present," Lucius said diffidently. "Here." He held out a small bunch of wildflowers and a bottle that glowed ruby in the soft light.

Hesitantly, Leia accepted them, surprise plain on her face. "Oh, thank you, Luke." There was question in her voice.

Lucius smiled. "May I come in?"

After another brief hesitation, Leia stepped back, waved him in. Lucius closed the door, lounged against it. She looked particularly appealing tonight. Her long dark hair was loose, waving down her back, and she had changed to a flowing robe. Under his scrutiny, she flushed, pulled the robe together at her throat.

"Luke. I think you'd better--"

"Go?" he suggested.

"Certainly not," she said, lifting her chin. "Come and sit down."

Lifting his eyebrows in surprise, Lucius complied. Leia sat beside him on the low couch. After a moment, Lucius picked up the wine. "Glasses?"

Leia went to the bathroom, returned with one glass. "This is all I have, Luke. Unless you want to go filch one from the cafeteria?"

Lucius shook his head. He poured wine into the glass, lifted it in silent toast to Leia, then took a sip. Silently, he offered her the glass.

Slowly, Leia sat beside him, took the glass. Her eyes dark in her pale face, her gaze an odd mixture of question and anticipation, she too raised the glass, then drank.

She set the glass down, sat watching him.

Well, well. Perhaps I needn't get you drunk, after all. Lucius shifted closer to Leia, curving one arm around her shoulders. It took only the lightest of pressure to bring her fully into his embrace.

Lucius kissed her upturned mouth, gently at first, then with passion. Gauging the right instant, he pushed her back before she was quite ready to stop the kiss. She would have moved back to him, but he caught her face between his hands, smiling tenderly down at her glowing face.

This promised to be the most entertaining night he'd spent in several years. Ordinarily, the only way a Palpatine could have a woman of those damnably-arrogant Organas was by chaining her down and raping her. And here was a princess of the Organas coming willingly, eagerly into his arms.

With exquisite artistry, Lucius bent to fit his mouth to Leia's. She was soft, pliantly responsive.

So you would take my throne from me, would you, Leia? The Palpatines too decadent for you--well, decadency has its uses, as I intend you to discover. Lucius pulled Leia closer. He had no intention of losing his eventual throne. He infinitely preferred Princess Leia to lose her rebellion. This night would be an intriguing dash of spice. Sweet revenge indeed.

†

Leia stretched, pressed closer to Luke, lying beside her. She had no idea why she'd woken, but she was content to stay here, her head pillowed on Luke's muscular shoulder.

Dear Luke. Leia snuggled still closer to the warmth of his body. It had been a fantastic night. Luke was a charming lover. Sweet... She'd been trying to get him into her bed for almost a year. It... had certainly been worth the wait--

And just where did shy Luke get that fantastic expertise. Leia? Leia stiffened, ice suddenly forming in her veins in place of hot-running blood. *Not Luke, Luke, Luke. NOT-- Oh, my God. Lucius? LUCIUS?*

It took Leia less than five minutes to slide carefully out of bed, fling on the first piece of clothing her groping hand encountered, and run down the hall. Clutching her robe, she quietly opened the door, entered, and as quietly closed and locked the door behind her.

She moved to the bed, stopped out of reach. "Han? Han!"

Han jerked awake, his arm waving wildly. "What the-- Leia? What the hell're you doing here?"



Leia sat on the edge of the bed. Despite everything, an impish grin lit her face. "Oh, come now, Han," she said reproachfully.

"At this hour of the night?" said Han indignantly.

Leia sputtered with laughter, caught herself. "Han--"

Han pushed himself to a sitting position, the sheet sliding down his bare chest to his waist. "Leia. Dear, sweet, darling Leia. I've been trying to drag you into bed for a year. IT'S 3:00 IN THE MORNING, LEIA! What the hell--"

"Han, it's important. Luke's not Luke."

Han closed his eyes for a moment. "Luke's not Luke. I don't believe you woke me up at 3:00 in the morning to tell me that." He leaned forward, gripped her shoulders. "Leia,

go away. Go back to sleep. It's 3:00 in the MORNING, Leia."

"No, Han, I'm serious. He's not."

"Look, Your Worshipfulness--"

"Han, I just realized it. I left Luke sleeping naked in MY bed, Han." With a grim smile, Leia saw she had his full attention now. "It was a marvelous night, too, Han. One of the best I've ever had."

"YOU?" said Han, looking stunned.

"Han, I went to the Imperial Court when I was fifteen. If there's a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old virgin there, no one's ever met her. Anyway, he's not--"

"Okay," Han said with a gulp. "So you and the kid finally-- Well for the love of All, that don't make him not him!"

"You don't understand, Han. He started it. He was fantastic, Han. Han--"

"It's not Luke," they finished together.

END OF PART ONE



IF YOU FEEL YOU SIMPLY MUST KNOW
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT, HERE IS

PART TWO

"Okay, Princess." Han's voice was hard. There was no lighthearted foolery about him now. "If it's not Luke, who? Spy? A-- And more importantly, where's Luke?"

"If I'm right," said Leia in a very small voice, "he's in the Imperial Palace on Remus."

Han said nothing. He merely grabbed her shoulders again and shook her vigorously. "Listen, your royal idiocy. I want a straight story out of you and I want it now. Understand?"

Leia's smoulderingly angry eyes promised an imminent explosion of royal wrath. Twisting out of his hands, she yanked her slipping robe tightly closed and glared at him. But he was right, damn him. Leia took a deep breath.

"I think Luke's in the Imperial Palace, because--because--"

"Leia," said Han warningly.

"--because I have the horrible feeling that the man in my bed is the Grand Duke Lucius."

There was dead silence for a full minute.

"Aw, shee-it!" said Han, turning to slam his fist into the pillow. "God damn it, I knew I should never 'a joined up with you and your fuckin' rebellion. You people couldn't rebel your way out of a paper bag!"

Leia drew herself up. "May I remind you, Captain Solo, that you're the one who brought him back here?"

"I knew it," said Han disgustedly. "Now it's MY fault. How was I supposed to know there were two of 'em? I thought one Luke was plenty." Sudden suspicion crossed his face. "There's something fishy about this, Your Worship."

"What?" said Leia, her voice and face the very sound and image of surprised innocence.

"You know damn well what," Han informed her. "I know the way your sneaky princess mind works. 'N I don't know why, but I'm gettin' the feeling you're saying Luke and the Grand Duke Lucius are--"

"Brothers," Leia said. "Twins."

Han closed his eyes and ostentatiously counted to ten. Then he looked at Leia once more. "I'm telling you, and I'm only telling you once. You want me to help you outta this mess, Princess, you better explain. Or I'm wakin' Chewie and blasting the Falcon off this ball of rock in the next hour. So give!"

Leia sighed. "All right, Han. You see--" She paused. "Tell me, just how much do you know about the Imperial family? And the Grand Duke?"

"Damn all," Han admitted cheerfully. "They haven't invited me to tea recently."

"Now who's wasting time?" Leia muttered under her breath. Aloud, she said, "You've heard of the Grand Duke Drusus?"

"Palpatine's brother? Yeah--ain't he the one who ran off with that Jedi lady, or somethin' like that?"

"Or something like that," Leia agreed dryly. "Drusus was--well, he wanted to bring back the Republic. He married a Jedi, over strenuous protests from the rest of the Imperial family."

Leia frowned, tugging at her robe. "You must understand, Han, that this was all several years before I was even born, and most of it's been very, very well hushed up. But--" She shook her head. "And then Drusus's 'Jedi lady' was to have a child. At that point, things get really confused, and the stories are so damn contradictory-- What I do know is that Drusus, well, ran away, basically. With his wife. To join the beginnings of the rebellion, so people say. Or maybe it was the renegade Jedi."

"Palpatine must've loved that," said Han. "But what--"

"So Palpatine tried to track them down. They eventually recovered Drusus's son. I think the wife was dead by that time--that point's not clear." Leia stared past Han, her eyes oddly reflective. "Nobody ever did find out what happened to Drusus. He just vanished. Oh, there were always rumors--that he'd taken some crazy nom de guerre and--"

"Some crazy name like Skywalker?" asked Han with heavy sarcasm.

Leia nodded curtly and continued, "I always discounted most of the stories, myself. Like the one that claimed there had been two sons of Drusus. Twins. But when Luke came bounding into my cell on the Death Star, I knew that story had been true."

There was another brooding silence. It was broken by a vigorously profane curse from Han.

"Han!" said Leia.

"Oh, don't act so shocked, Your Worship." Han sounded coldly angry. "So Luke's really the Emperor's nephew, is he? Who knows? The kid sure as hell don't."

"I know. Dodonna. Some of the others--the ones who were highly placed before they joined us, the ones who are perceptive--may guess."

"Why the hell didn't you tell him?" Han said. "Why the big secret? Damn it, it's his life you're playing around with!"

"Oh, Han," said Leia sadly. "Tell Luke and risk him going to his uncle--his family? His rich, powerful, important family? Why should we have trusted him? He was a stranger."

"Even though he blew the Death Star for you and saved your royal rebel neck," said Han angrily. "You don't trust anyone, Your Highness, do you?"

"No," Leia said. "I don't."

"Okay, that was a year ago. Why's it still a secret?"

"If we made Luke's identity public, Palpatine would tear the galaxy apart to get him back," said Leia. "How does it look to have the Emperor's nephew a hero of the Alliance? We have enough problems as it is."

"You sure as bloody hell do," Han told her bluntly. "Starting with that Grand Duke in your bed." Frowning thoughtfully, he said, "Okay, Leia. You go get Dodonna and a security squad. I'll go toss a sleep-grenade into your bedroom and then tie up this Grand Duke of yours."

"He's not my Grand Duke!" Leia said hotly. "And you can go get Dodonna. I'll take care of Lucius."

Han shook his head, grinning. "No way, Princess. I want him knocked out, not killed. I don't care how big a fool he made of you. We need him to try and swap for Luke."

Leia stared at him, startled.

"You didn't have to say anything," Han informed her in answer to her unspoken question. "You're a lousy actress, Princess. It was written all over your face."

"If you are quite ready?" Leia's voice was cold enough to cause emotional frostbite in a sensitive soul. She was unfortunately aware that Han Solo did not fall into that category. She rose and stalked toward the door.

Han grinned and swung himself out of bed, reaching for his jeans. "By the way, Your

Royalness, may this humble peasant ask a question?"

Leia paused at the door, turning to survey Han's body appreciatively. He was a damn good-looking man. His chief flaw was that he was all too well aware of it. "Yes?" she said with an arrogant lift of her eyebrows.

"Leia," said Han plaintively, "why Luke?"

"Han," she said sweetly, "he's a challenge. You aren't."

She got out of the room just before Han's accurately-hurled jeans hit the door with a loud thwack.

†

Meanwhile, back at the palace, Luke had been having a far more difficult time of it than his reckless twin. From the moment he was released from the palace infirmary, he ran into problems. He did his best to escape the buildings and go wait for Han at the spaceport. This effort was ended when he discovered just how closely an injured heir-to-the-throne was watched. The same went for trying to pull off an espionage coup.

It was far more difficult for basically diffident, quiet Luke to pass as the dashing Lucius than it was for Lucius to play sober Luke. Luke was released from the infirmary, with much fussing instruction to take it easy from the doctors, after two days. Two days after that, he found himself summoned to the Emperor Palpatine's office.

Once Luke had seated himself in the chair before Palpatine's massive, cluttered desk, the Emperor set down his pen and leaned forward, hands folded on the desktop.

"Now," Palpatine said, fixing his gaze on the uneasy Luke, "who are you?"

For a second, Luke was convinced the entire room had dropped six feet. He stared at the Emperor, who was suddenly out of focus.

"And don't do anything rash," Palpatine said. "I assure, you would regret it."

Still speechless with shock, Luke found that he believed the Emperor's statement implicitly.

Palpatine tilted his head, eyeing Luke. "It's a fantastic plastic surgery job, I grant you that. But you are without a doubt the worst spy I've ever encountered. Now, I repeat: Who are you?" The Emperor's face abruptly hardened, his voice edged with cold, commanding insistence. "And where is the Grand Duke Lucius? You had better hope he's still alive."

"I--I don't know where he is," said Luke miserably. "And--and--I'm Luke Skywalker."

The Emperor placed his hands flat on the desk and rose very slowly to his feet. Equally slowly, he came around the desk to stand directly before Luke. He put a hand under Luke's chin and gently tilted his head back. For what seemed an endless stretch of time, Palpatine stared down, studying Luke's face intently.

To Luke's surprise, Palpatine closed his eyes, a look of extreme weariness on his lined face. With a sigh, the Emperor once more looked down at Luke. Then his gaze lifted, staring past Luke into space.

"Drusus," said Palpatine softly, "if you weren't already dead, I'd kill you. With my bare hands, Drusus."



Not relying on his newly discovered nephew's nonexistent family loyalty, Palpatine had him placed in comfortable confinement, while

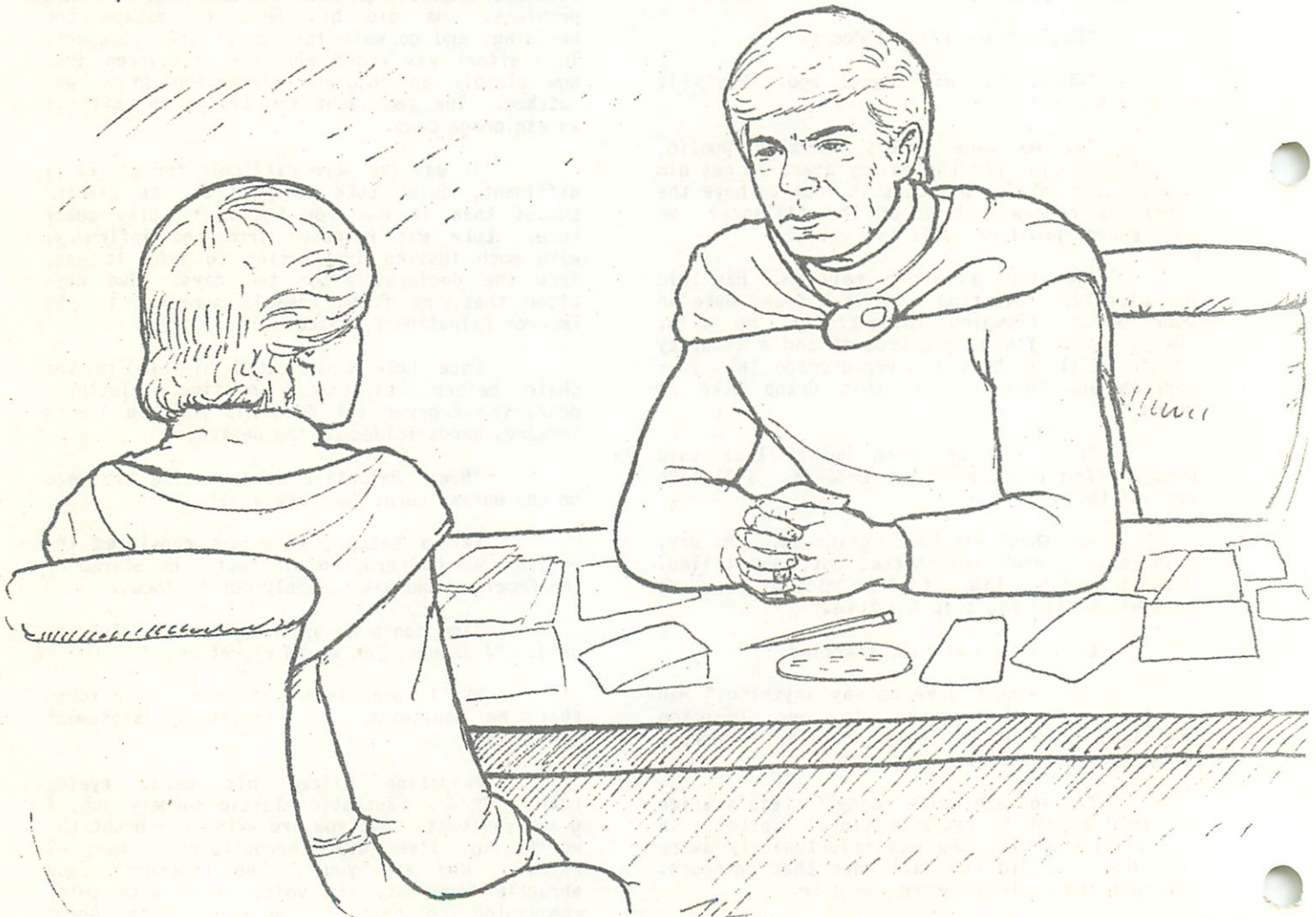
extremely careful and polite interrogators took from Luke--without, of course, his conscious consent--the location of the hidden rebel base.

So, by the time Leia discovered Lucius's identity, the Emperor, Luke, and an armada of Imperial military vessels were about to pounce on the base. Lucius had only been imprisoned for a day when the Imperial fleet burst out of hyperspace, effectively cordoning off the planet.

"Now," said the Emperor over wide-band frequency, "I want Princess Leia Organa, General Dodonna, Commander Willard, and the Grand Duke Lucius, alive and well, in the middle of your landing field ready for pick-up in one hour. If they are not there in one hour, this entire planet will be molten slag. Should that become necessary--I am sorry, Lucius."



"You can't!" someone said. "He'll never touch this place, not as long as we hold his nephew."



"Oh, yes," said Leia. "He will." Her voice was flat and lifeless. All color, all animation had left her.

"You're going?" said Han.

"We have no choice," she said in the same dead voice.

General Dodonna had aged a dozen years in fifteen minutes. Now he nodded, slowly, in assent. "None. Now we are--"

"Stalling," Han said. He put an arm around Leia, hugged her roughly. "Okay, Princess. Let's go."

Leia shot a quick, grateful glance up at him.

"Aw, come on," Han said, "Leia, do you really think I'd let them drag you to the Emperor alone?" He grinned, his voice warm and mocking. "And miss all the fun when you spit in Palpatine's eye? You gotta be kiddin'!"

Leia leaned her cheek against the rough fabric of his jacket. "Oh, Han. Thank you."

They were escorted, under the heaviest of guard, to the Emperor's office on the Imperial flagship. Leia's head was proudly high, her back straight. Dodonna and Willard, too, walked defiantly. Being led somewhere surrounded by armed guards and with his hands manacled behind his back was no novel experience for Han, who wore his customary air of insolent nonchalance.

Han, in fact, looked a good deal less concerned than did Lucius, who had been whisked on ahead by obviously worried officers.

"Sit down," said Palpatine once the prisoners had filed in. "You, too, Lucius."

Once they were seated, the door opened again. Luke Skywalker was ushered in. He wore excellently cut, expensive clothing and a look of extreme misery.

Ignoring everyone else, he walked slowly over to Leia's chair and knelt beside it. "Leia," he said chokingly, "I blew the mission and--and everything else. Oh, Leia, I'm sorry."

She tried to move her hands to touch him, empty comfort though it would be. Luke jumped up and whirled on Palpatine. "You've won!" Luke said. "Do you have to keep her tied up?"

"Yes, Luke," Palpatine said patiently. "I'm afraid I do. At least until we've concluded the business at hand and come to some agreement."

"Agreement?" said Leia haughtily. "With you?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Palpatine said. "With me. I do happen to be the Emperor, you know."

There was a pause, during which Luke and Lucius were studying each other with varying degrees of disbelief.

"In addition," Palpatine added, "I hold all the cards."

Another silence. There could be no argument with that.

"Now," said Palpatine, "I'm growing a little tired of this rebellion of yours. Thanks to a number of things, I am now in a position to put a stop to it."

"You can't stop it," Leia said fiercely. "No matter what you do to us."

"Oh, there will always be rebellion," Palpatine said. "But without its leadership, this rebellion will die away to almost nothing. Sporadic outbursts will be the only thing left. For a while."

"Kill us, then," Leia said. "It's all you understand--"

Palpatine smiled and shook his head. "Your family always did lack a certain grasp of the realities of political expedience. I will kill you only if I must. Now, my--suggestion--is this--" he stopped, looked at Leia. "How many people on your base?"

"Approximately five thousand," Leia said.

"Well, Your Highness, I am prepared to close my eyes and allow those five thousand traitors to escape, minus, of course, any armaments and any equipment beyond bare transport. If three conditions are met."

Leia, Han, Luke, Dodonna, and Willard took a moment to exchange wary, dubious glances.

"And those conditions?" Leia said, sitting up straighter in her chair.

"The first, and easiest, is that the 'Alliance's' high command surrender, and allow themselves to be placed under confinement."

"Go on," said Leia after a moment.

Palpatine's eyes went from Leia to Luke. "Secondly, Luke Skywalker takes his proper place as my nephew."

"What?" said Luke, looking totally stunned. "But I can't do that!"

"Oh?" said Palpatine, raising his eyebrows. "Why not?"

"But--but--well, I blew up your Death Star!"



"So you did, Luke. I was exceedingly grateful, too."

"What?" said Leia.

"Oh, certainly," Palpatine said benignly. "By the time we discovered what Moff Tarkin was up to with that little, er, building program of his, it was too late to stop it. Oddly enough, I prefer to see Lucius, reprobate though he may be, on the throne rather than the late and unlamented Tarkin."

"You flatter me, uncle," Lucius said with a wry grin.

"Shut up, Lucius," said his uncle coldly. "Now, Luke--we really must do something about your name, by the way, at least for public usage--"

"I can't be a Grand Duke!" Luke said doggedly.

"Ah, I see. It's against your principles," Palpatine said. "Just like your father. Well, in that case, Luke, you can harness your youthful energies to something a bit more constructive than galactic revolt. I'm going to put you in charge of correcting the abuses in and reforming the structure of one or two of the Imperial bureaucracies--including what's left of the old Jedi knights. That should keep you out of mischief."

"But--"

"And then come back to me in a year, Luke, and tell me I'm evil because I occa-

sionally cut through red tape and did my own oppressing of the downtrodden," Palpatine said. "That is condition two."

No one seemed to want to ask about the third and last condition. Finally Leia swallowed hard and said, "What is the last demand?"

There was another, longer pause before Palpatine said, "That you marry Lucius."

No outburst from Leia. Her shoulders sagged, and she stared at the floor. That made perfect sense, and everyone in the room knew it. They also knew that that one move would effectively kill the Alliance.

When several minutes had gone by with no sound from anyone, Han said, "Yeah, but Your Emperorship, what's to make you keep your side of the deal?"

"If those terms are met," Palpatine said, "I give you my word that those on the base will be allowed to escape."

"Yeah," Han drawled. "But is your word good? That's the real question, ain't it?"

Palpatine looked to Leia. "Well, Your Highness? Is that guarantee enough for you?"

Leia never looked up. She nodded.

"And you, Luke?" said Palpatine. "Will you take my word for it?"

Reluctantly, Luke also nodded.

Palpatine pressed a button on his desk. The door opened and a guard entered and saluted. Palpatine nodded toward the prisoners. "Take the general, the commander, and--"

"Han Solo," Han informed him with a jaunty grin.

"--and Solo to the detention area." Palpatine turned to Luke and Leia. "Now--"

"Han stays," said Leia quickly.

"Yes," said Luke. With an obvious effort, he added, "Please."

"As you wish," Palpatine said.

A few moments later, only the Emperor, Lucius, Luke, Leia, and Han remained in the room.

"You realize that heroics will avail you nothing?" Palpatine said. He pressed another button on the desk console. There was a high-pitched whine, then a click and a clatter as Han's and Leia's manacles opened and fell from their wrists.

Han promptly rose and went to lounge casually against the doorway, surveying the room with a look of sardonic amusement. Leia glanced

at him and he winked at her. Then she turned her attention back to Luke, who was once more kneeling beside her and holding her hands tightly.

"Now," Palpatine repeated, "it rests with the two of you. Luke, Leia, I want your answer."

"Leia," said Luke in a fierce whisper. "You can't. I won't, I swear it, Leia, no matter what he offers me."

"Oh, Luke," said Leia sadly. She didn't bother whispering. "You don't understand. We have no choice. If we don't agree, he has us anyway." Had them, and could achieve almost the same effect without their cooperation. She had one choice: she could make her marriage vows drugged or undrugged.

"But Leia--you can't marry him." For the first time, Luke turned to Lucius and glared at him.

"What?" For an instant, Leia was puzzled, then she smiled, ruefully. "Oh, that. Luke, royalty does not marry for personal preference." She lifted her gaze from Luke to exchange a glance of odd understanding with Lucius.

"As he will discover," Lucius said softly.

Leia shifted her hands until she was holding Luke's, trying to convey comfort. Then she lifted her chin and looked at Palpatine. "For my part, I agree."

"Leia," said Luke.

"No, Luke," she said wearily. "Oh, God, do you think I can stand having another planet on my conscience? All those people down there who followed us, trusted us? No, I can't do it again, I can't!"

Training or no training, tears slid down her cheeks. She pulled a hand from Luke's grasp to wipe them quickly away.

"Luke?" said Palpatine gently.

Luke stared up at Leia. She couldn't stand the pain and confusion in his eyes. After a moment, he shot a glance at Han. Han still wore his defiantly nonchalant expression. To Leia's heartfelt gratitude, he nodded at Luke and gave him a thumbs-up sign. Leia managed to smile at Han and then pressed Luke's hand reassuringly.

"All right," said Luke dully. "Then I agree, too." Then he squared his shoulders, sending his uncle a look of hostile defiance. "And I'm going to make the Jedi what they were before!"

"Luke," said Palpatine with a smile, "that is exactly what I had in mind."

NOW, AS THE PERCEPTIVE READER CAN PLAINLY SEE, THE STORY CAN BE VERY NICELY ENDED THERE. IF, HOWEVER, YOU ABSOLUTELY INSIST...

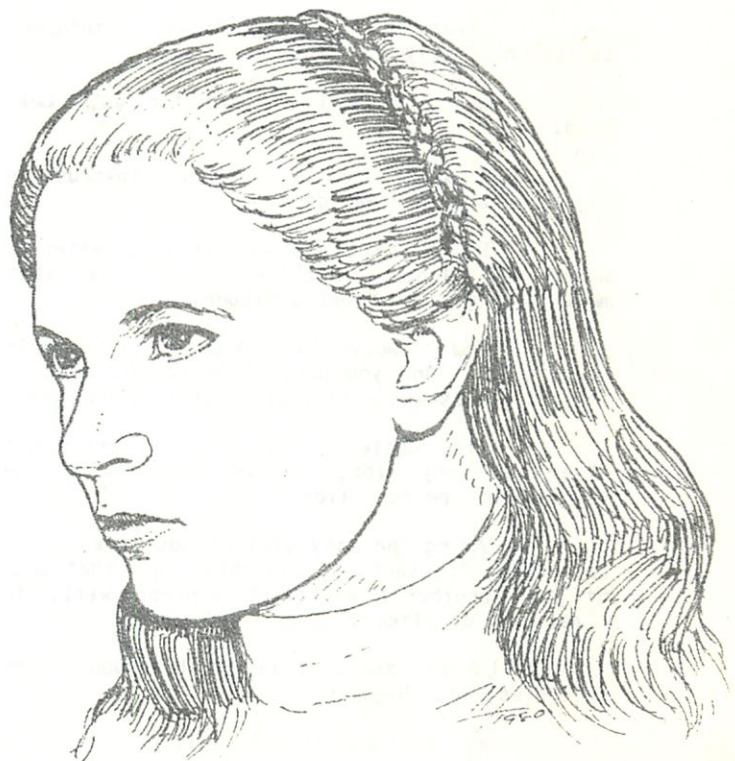
"Now, as to some of the details," said Palpatine. He bent a smiling glance on Leia. "I trust, my dear, that you do not object to an almost immediate and very public ceremony?"

Leia shook her head. "Your Excellency, I too have one condition. A full pardon for Captain Han Solo."

"Granted," began Palpatine, only to be interrupted by, "What?" from Han, and, "Nonsense," from Lucius.

Lucius strolled over to lean on his uncle's desk. "And take away all his fun? He won't thank you for it, Leia." Han and Lucius smiled at each other, their expressions giving them an uncanny resemblance. "He likes being a dangerous criminal."

"Very well," Palpatine said. "I have no wish to deprive anyone of such enjoyment. Tell me, Lucius, do you think he'd accept three hours to get out of range, or would he prefer to take off with the fleet firing at him?"



Han lifted an eyebrow, his grin widening. Lucius studied him a moment, grinned back. "Three hours shouldn't compromise his principles too much."

Palpatine shook his head. "All right, then. Three hours."

Leia pushed Luke back and rose to her feet. All his careless humor gone, Han straightened and walked over to them.

"Well, I guess this is it," he said awkwardly. The three of them looked at each other in wordless misery. "Aw, shit," said Han, and hauled Luke into a ruthless hug. "Goodbye--"

Leia knew "kid" was on the tip of Han's tongue. But he didn't say it.

"Goodbye, Luke Skywalker." Han squeezed him again, stepped back. He turned to Leia.

"Han." She held out her hand.

He took it and, to her astonishment, bent and raised it gracefully to his lips. "Goodbye, Princess."

There was an aching lump in her throat that precluded any attempt at speech. She tried to smile at him.

Han shot a glance at Lucius, grinned at Leia, then suddenly yanked her into his arms and kissed her--passionately.

"Pirate's privilege," he informed Lucius cheerfully a few moments later.

"Say goodbye to Chewie for us," Leia said.

"I will." After another rib-crushing hug from Luke, Han was gone.

"Do you know," said Lucius, after a moment of silence, "I think I could like that man. He's got the right attitude."

"You would," said his uncle crushingly. "And you haven't heard the last of this little escapade of yours either, young man."

"But, uncle," said Lucius, opening his blue eyes very wide, "I did bring about the downfall of the rebellion."

"Among the many virtues you lack," said Palpatine, "is tact. I can only trust that some of your brother's excellent manners will, in time, have an effect."

Lucius swept Leia a low bow. "My apologies, Your Highness."

She inclined her head coldly.

"And to you, Luke," Lucius added.

Leia looked from Luke to Lucius. Seen together, it was easy to tell the two apart. Features were identical, but stance, bearing, gesture, and expression told differently.

Luke leaned close to her, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Leia, I'll never give in. I'll get us out of this, if it takes the rest of my life."

Leia smiled at him sadly and shook her head. That's what he thought now. She knew better. Luke was basically an open, friendly person, responding to affection and warmth. She knew Palpatine, too.

The Emperor was no fool, to keep Luke hanging around idle to watch "his princess" married to his new-found brother. Leia suspected that by next year, Luke would have been married to some pretty and sweet-tempered princess, have a child well on the way, and be hip-deep in enthusiastic social reforming.

Anyone could be nobly defiant in the face of hostility. Leia doubted very much that Luke could maintain such an attitude when surrounded by loving kindness. Oh, yes, Palpatine would have Luke.

"I think that is about all for the moment." Palpatine's voice shattered Luke and Leia's concentration on each other. "Luke, Leia, you two will be escorted to your rooms. Lucius--"

"By the way, I also have a condition," Lucius said. He walked over to smile down at Leia. "Or perhaps you should consider it a warning. If you ever call me 'Luke' when we're in bed again, I'll probably beat you."

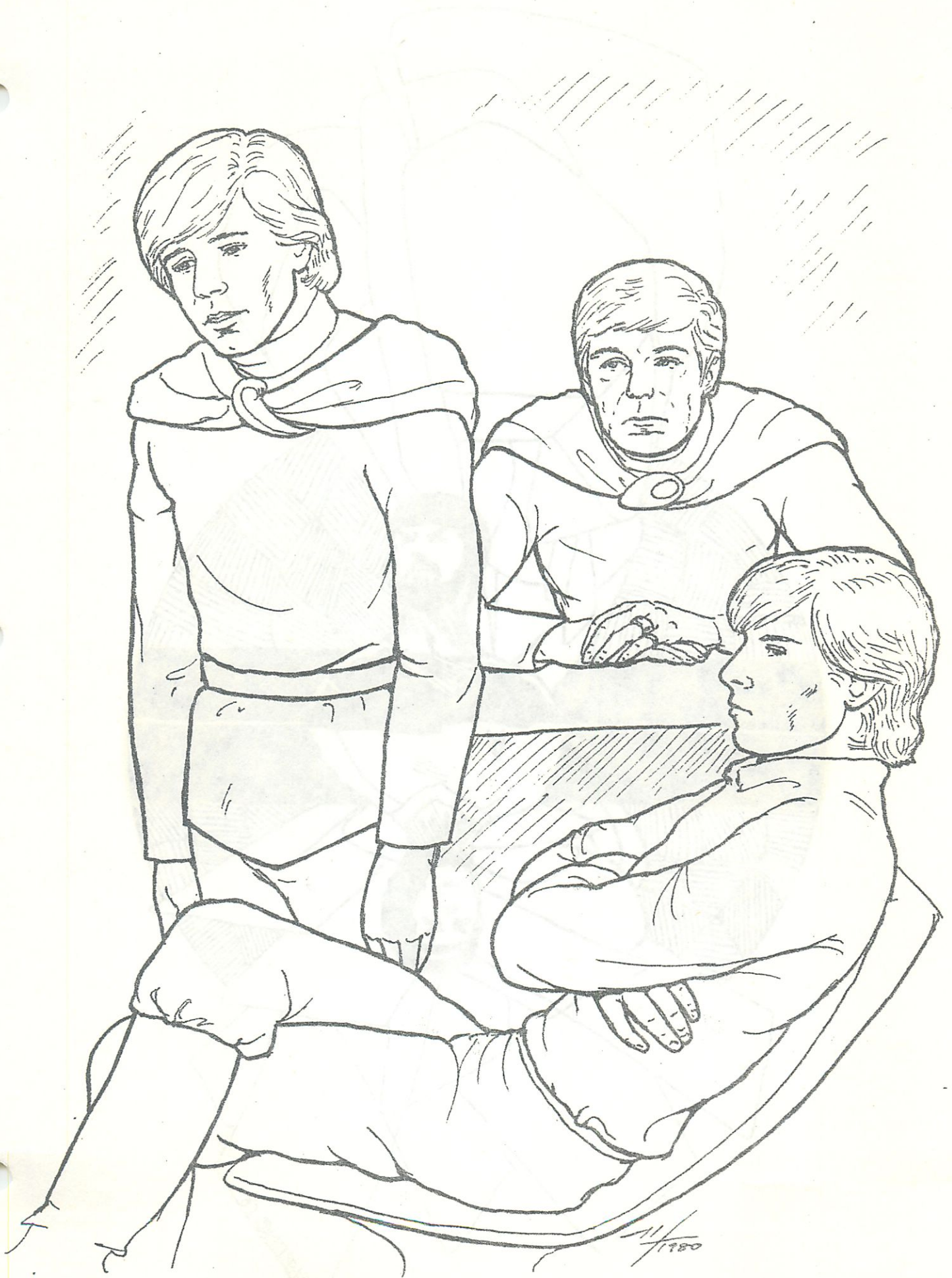
Leia discovered all her rebellion was not yet dead. "You're welcome to try, Your Grace," she said, her voice icy and her posture arrogant.

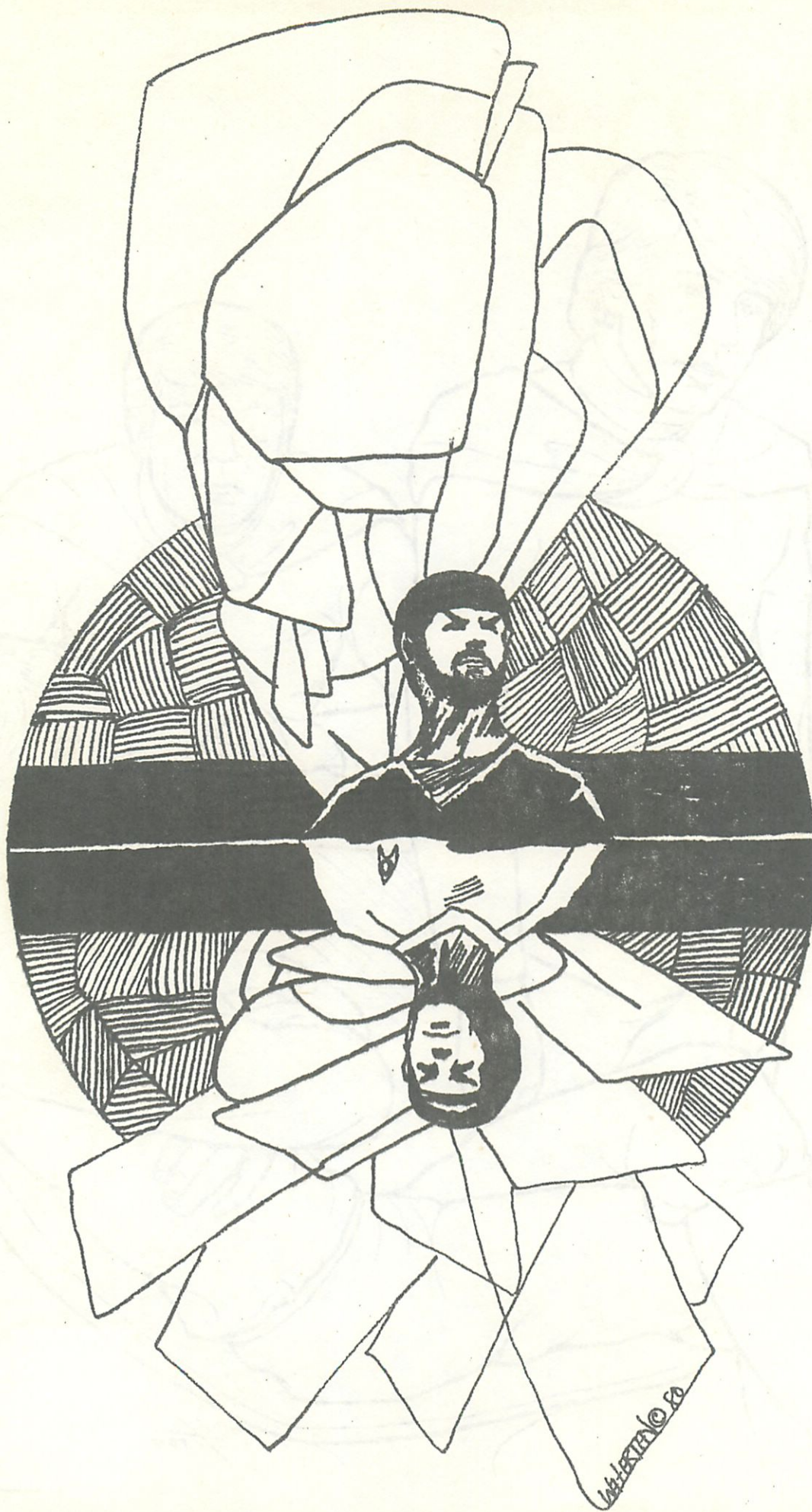
"I shall, Your Highness," Lucius said. He took her hand, kissed it with practiced skill. With a strangely-familiar-looking mocking grin, Lucius added, "Believe me, Your Worship, I shall."

AND THIS, GENTLE READER, IS
ABSOLUTELY AND DEFINITELY

THE END







COVENANT

IN THE MIRROR

by LOIS WELLING

The spinning glow-crystal refracted the soft cabin lighting, washing the room in the full spectrum of colors as Commander Spock, first officer of the I.S.S. *Enterprise* sat at his desk. He leaned back in his chair, slowly swirling the liqueur-filled goblet as he contemplated the message that had just been put through his private scrambler. It was from his father and, as usual, the Ambassador did not waste words. It took only three to convey the message, "Suitable female located". More was not needed. Implied was "come home and evaluate", which meant he was free to do so. There would be no trouble with the Council because T'Pol had convinced them it would not be to their advantage.

The Commander allowed a sly smile to form on his shadowed face. When T'Pol and Stonn had failed, the matriarch had immediately switched her allegiance. She had spoken to Star Fleet on his behalf and now, he knew, had cleared matters on Vulcan. The smile twisted. *Be warned, old woman. Sarek and I shall have your head on the end of an ohl yet.*

Involving Kirk and McCoy had been a calculated risk, but unavoidable. He had been on his way to Vulcan, the fever building within him, when another message had come from Sarek. Although the Ambassador had been off-planet at the time, his operatives had done their job. As always, Sarek's message had been sparse. It contained only one word. *Beware!* And so Spock's suspicions had been confirmed. T'Pol would challenge, but more than that. The odds would be against him. He had to try to equalize

them.

Obviously, T'Pol had changed her plan when she saw the humans. But to choose the Captain? It was the ultimate stupidity; everything was against the human.

For once McCoy was able to think for himself and, thought Spock with amusement, to act without explicit instructions. If the Captain had really died, it would have taken the entire family monies to silence the incident, if indeed it could have been done at all. *I owe McCoy.* He instructed himself to remember that the next time he and the doctor clashed.

He sipped from the glass, then sat stroking his beard as he thought about T'Pol. *Tricky bitch. I would have enjoyed taking her. Could have... I must practice more control. To blame the fever does not absolve me. The action was revenge, pure and simple, and I could have controlled it. But I did so savor the look in her eyes...and on Stonn's face...*

But it had made no sense, he admonished himself. The action had served to snap him out of the fever, but it would have been smarter to follow the traditional course and kill her after the *pon farr*. *Such waste is unVulcan.* He downed the last swallow in the goblet. *But it is done.*

And Stonn's accident while off Vulcan. Such a pity. He saluted the air with the empty goblet and placed it on the desk. *My*

compliments, Father.

His mood darkened as he put away the liqueur bottle. He slammed the cabinet door. *Vulcans are surely cursed, doubly cursed.* The *pon farr* and the telepathy formed a lethal combination.

Like all sentient males, Vulcans could enjoy sex and derive satisfaction from it, but to reproduce... *To reproduce we must endure this humiliation.* To survive the fever and create new life, they needed a trained telepathic mate. And a defenseless male was easy prey; this fact had almost led to the extinction of the Vulcan race. The bonding had been instituted and tests devised to secure against such treachery.

But, as Spock's own broken bonding proved, it did not always work. Other races did not understand the importance of Vulcan mate selection. Finding a female was no problem, finding a suitable mate was. *They have no idea. They envy us the telepathy, not realizing it's a double-edged sword.* Moreover, Spock knew that his recently-aborted *pon farr* had left him vulnerable, a condition he would not tolerate. *So I shall go to Vulcan and meet this "suitable" female, T'Ayrian.*

*

Commander Spock faced James Kirk across the desk in the captain's quarters. Kirk looked at his first officer. There was an edge in his voice. "I got you your leave, but believe me it took some doing. The trip to Vulcan isn't exactly the shortest; you'll have several layovers, but it was the best I could do on such short notice."

Kirk stressed the words and the Vulcan nodded, accepting the debt.

*

Six days later, Spock emerged from the Vulcan spaceport and boarded the private stratocar his family had sent. He had the car take him to the apartment T'Ayrian's family maintained in the city. He had scheduled the appointment for just after his arrival so he could be done with it. While on Vulcan he had important matters to attend to and wanted this out of the way.

He instructed the driver to wait, then took the lift to the third floor. He used the time to review. Her name was T'Ayrian and she was the younger daughter, just past twenty-five turnings, of T'Salma and Sigee of a clan, whose members had been engaged in commerce for several generations. Her bond mate had been killed before the marriage. *A virgin.* He smiled inwardly as he remembered Sarek's marginal comment on the portfolio tape and agreed. *A definite plus.*

He touched the signalplate and waited. Thirty seconds later the door opened. He inspected the young female who faced him. His immediate reaction was positive. Though she was not as striking a beauty as T'Pring, she was attractive in the way he preferred his women; tall, slender, an air of elegance. When Sarek said suitable, he meant it; but then why be surprised? Father and son almost always agreed on what constituted "suitable" in females. When she spoke to welcome him, he noted that her voice was soft, but not timid. He was grateful that she did not have the accent so common to people of the northern hemisphere.

They spoke the traditional greetings and she invited him into the sitting room. As he followed her he glanced at the decor. The extensive art collection represented varied cultures of the galaxy, and several pieces were from extinct societies and should have been in a museum.

When they were seated, T'Ayrian said, "I trust thy journey was not too tiresome."

"Somewhat, yes. I had to transfer three different times with lengthy layovers. Have you traveled off Vulcan?"

"I have been allowed to accompany my father on several different occasions, and I did find it most interesting. But my parents would not allow too many trips because of my schooling."

They engaged in polite, surface conversation, but Spock knew that she was as intent in her study of him as he was in his of her. It was obvious that she had dressed to impress him and the effect did not go unnoticed. The deep hunter green of her long dress was a color rarely seen in Vulcan nature. It was worn to bring out the green of her eyes. To compliment the dress and her fair skin, she had chosen a simple gold necklace and earrings that were just barely visible through her loosely upswept hair.

After almost an hour, she said, "I have prepared a meal for us." She stood and led the way to a small garden balcony. "I believe thee will find it pleasant here."

She excused herself and Spock took the opportunity to examine his growing restlessness. He had predicted a short meeting with the whole family in which they would all live up to the formalities these situations demanded. Then he could excuse himself and get on with his other business. But to find her alone and apparently in no hurry... Her return with a tray of food put a temporary halt to his thoughts.

He watched as she set the table for two. Controlling his annoyance, he said, "Your parents will not be joining us?"

"No. They are not at home."

More delays, he thought, inwardly

irritated. "I have a tape from Sigeer. He agreed to this time..."

"The tape was altered."

"You?" A questioning eyebrow raised.

She nodded.

"Explain!" Curiosity softened his anger.

"I wished to meet with thee, alone. These occasions can be most awkward for the two principals; extra individuals only increase uneasiness."

Seeing he was not convinced, she continued. "I would assume that thee has read the portfolio, as I have." He nodded. "I wish to know the individual to whom those facts pertain. That can best be accomplished without others present."

"Interesting," was all he said as he took his place across the table from her.

During the silence of the meal, he reflected on her actions. *So the attractive package has a mind and can think for itself. But unless that intelligence is founded on good sense, and can be controlled, it is useless. The food is well prepared and served, and there is no doubt of her social grace. She seems to have all the qualifications I would require in a bondmate. The real question is, what does she hope to gain from this?*

*

Upon arriving home, Spock joined his mother in the sitting room. She turned and smiled at the sight of him. "Spock." They moved toward each other.

"Mother." He embraced her lightly. "You are looking well."

She stood back from him. "I am well, son. And you?"

"Very well, Mother. I assure you." She had given him an opening to discuss the T'Pring matter, should he wish to do so.

When it was obvious he did not, she said, "Your interview, it went well?"

"Interesting. Very interesting. T'Ayrian appears to be a many-faceted female. I could find her acceptable... But, from you, Mother, I wish to know how common gossip evaluates her."

With a haughty look and a mocking tone Amanda said, "And you believe your mother has access to common gossip?"

"Then tell me what un-common gossip has to say."

Amanda laughed and Spock enjoyed the sound. It was pleasant to be home, to be able to trust and let down one's guard.

"Well, my son, the lady is thought to be ambitious. She disagrees with her father's management of the trading company." Amanda watched her son process these facts. "T'Ayrian considers her father too timid. She has plans to expand the business, but he blocks them. It is believed that when he dies and the daughters inherit we shall see many changes."

"Her elder sister shares these plans?"

"It is believed so, although she and her mate live across the Umland and seem involved in their medical practice. Of the two, T'Ayrian is considered the stronger."

"Thank you, Mother. I shall meditate upon this when I am in the desert."

"You leave tomorrow?"

"Yes. And Sarek will join me in two days."

"I am pleased that you shall have this restful time. You say you are well, but a mother knows different."

Before he could protest, they heard a stratocar on the landing pad. Spock offered his arm to Amanda and mother and son went out to greet Sarek.

*

The next morning Spock hoisted the pack onto his back and began walking, letting the heat soak into his body. He forced the problems of the *Enterprise* from his mind. He needed this time away. Even a Vulcan must relax sometimes and be free of tension. While on board he could never let down his guard, he had to remain constantly alert. A careless officer was a dead one.

He walked and surveyed his surroundings. With each step he recalled the historical significance of what had happened here in the desert. With time the dunes had shifted and nature's forces had weathered away the evidence of the battles that had been waged here. But much of what Vulcan was today had been settled on this spot. Here the upstart Surak had been beheaded.

During the evening of the third day, he rounded a dune to find Sarek setting up camp at the agreed-upon place. Spock pitched in and they shared the chores of their meal, then spent the evening in silence. Spock could see that his father was attempting to relax in preparation for the next day's hike. *Could the work and the strain be getting too much for him?* Spock worried. For the first time in his life, he realized that his father would not live forever. It shocked him. He vowed to discuss



Sarek's health with Amanda.

*

In the following days the two men, alone with each other and without operatives in constant attendance, were free to talk. As careful as they were, homes and offices were never truly safe. Here in the desert, freed from that worry, they talked; each briefed the other as to the state of events in their respective circles and discussed plans.

On their last night, with business finished, they relaxed by the fire. Sarek had fared well on the trek and Spock was much relieved as to his father's physical condition. As the evening grew late and the fire settled to a glow, Spock decided to ask a question that had been gnawing at him.

"Father, why did you summon me home for this interview?"

"Spock, if you read the psychological tests, you know the match would be good."

"Sarek, you avoid the obvious. Her family is not of our political persuasion."

"I realized that and had not previously considered her. But she does offer other assets... And it was Sigeer who approached me. I reviewed her portfolio and decided to forward it. An interesting note, my son. Sigeer told me that it was T'Ayrian who requested the interview."

"Indeed... Do you suspect something?"

"No. I have checked this out most carefully. I do not believe Sigeer uses his daughter in this." Sarek's voice held a hint of amusement. "From what I hear of that female, I do not think she would allow herself to be used. No. If there is purpose in this, it is personal. And that, of course, is your problem." Sarek was obviously enjoying this at the expense of his son. "Spock, she has much to offer in appearance and personality. If one must be bonded, it is preferable not to be chained to a bore."

"One question, Father. Was either my heritage or my recent difficulty mentioned?"

Spock could sense his father's piercing eyes across the glowing embers of the fire. "Do you believe I would allow it?"

"Then you do not believe that a marriage between us would signify an alliance between our families?"

"No. If a bonding should take place, I shall take care to see that that impression is not given."

"Control of a trading company offers many possibilities."

"We can wait until she inherits."

As they approached the last rise in the terrain, revealing the house a quarter-kilometer in the distance, Spock admitted to himself that he did not want this trip to end. It meant the return of reality and deadly serious matters.

They arrived home to find Amanda waiting in the garden. "Where have you been? You were due home this morning."

"Is there some problem?" Sarek asked.

"Problem? No. It is just that... I was concerned."

Sarek took her hand. "I am sorry, my wife. That was not our intention."

"There is something else. Sigeer called. He extended an invitation and I accepted. We are due there in less than an hour." Amanda relaxed, now she knew husband and son were safe. She watched as they exchanged glances over this news. "Well, am I to have a daughter or do I call and convey our regrets?"

Sarek added his question to his wife's. "Spock? The choice is yours."

When Spock did not answer immediately, Sarek said, "Amanda, perhaps he has been among humans too long. His ability to make decisions seems somewhat impaired."

Amanda smiled as she agreed with her husband.

Spock watched his parents have their little joke as he contemplated the matter. There was really only one decision. Eventually, he would require a Vulcan wife. By waiting he could not hope to do better and, in all likelihood, the reverse would be true. Moreover, T'Ayrian was too eligible to remain available for very long. "I shall accept this bonding."

"Very well," said Sarek. "Let us try not to be late."

They arrived in time and were ushered into the sitting room. T'Ayrian was there with her parents. All performed the standard greetings and the three newcomers could not help but notice the tension that existed between T'Ayrian and her parents. After several seconds of strained silence, Sigeer faced Spock.

"I assume your being here now means that you are agreeable to a bonding between T'Ayrian and yourself."

"Correct." Spock could guess that was not the answer Sigeer wanted to hear. As he watched this family he was thinking that it was so different from his own. He, Sarek, and

Amanda were united. Their body language told him that the other trio was not. T'Ayrian seemed to be playing the role of dutiful daughter, but anyone could sense the undercurrents. Now he understood why she had wished to meet with him alone.

Sigeer continued. "My daughter has a somewhat unusual request. She wishes for a bonding and marriage to take place before Spock leaves Vulcan."

Silence.

Amanda recovered her voice first. "May we ask why?"

T'Ayrian rose from her chair. "Children are bonded so they may become acquainted and so they will have certain knowledge of each other when--it is needed. Not only have Spock and I not had that time, but I believe that such knowledge alone is not adequate to build a solid marriage. Spock and I, even bonded, would be strangers, and I have no desire to enter my marriage bed with a stranger."

Spock's immediate reaction to her speech was that it sounded rehearsed, but all he said was, "T'Ayrian and I will discuss this alone." He took her arm and guided her to the balcony.

"I forbid..." Sigeer was out of his chair, but it was too late. The balcony door slid closed.

Alone on the balcony the two faced each other.

"Why a bonding now?" Spock asked.

"Because we are strangers. Does thee really wish to face thy time with an unknown mate?"

"It is traditional."

"It is stupidity! Spock, it is not unheard of to marry before the time."

"Under certain circumstances." He knew that among the poor there were oftentimes problems that made it feasible for a couple to marry before the next *pon farr*. "None of which apply here."

"Spock." Her voice was not soft now. "The offer was made as a pledge of my faith. If it make me suspect, I withdraw it."

"A pledge of faith?"

"If we were married now, I could not challenge later."

"There could still be betrayal."

"From you also."

"Yes."

"Strangers cannot trust." She moved across the balcony to stand at the rail.

When he stood beside her, he said, "This is an uncommon action."

"I have never considered myself common; I do not intend to live a common life--with a common mate."

He ran his finger down her cheek. "I do believe that marriage to you would prove to be most interesting."

She smiled up at him. "It is decided then?"

"It is decided."

The two joined the others and Spock made the announcement. "I leave for the *Enterprise* in two days. Can the ceremonies be performed before then?"

Sarek stood. "Certainly not tomorrow. We shall arrange them for the following day. I shall contact T'Pau..."

Impatiently, T'Salma nudged her husband and he spoke. "My wife is related to T'Mal. She acted for our other daughter and we should prefer to ask her again... If there are no objections?" he added hesitantly.

Spock exchanged glances with Sarek and Amanda. Neither expressed a sign of dissent, and he knew that T'Mal was a political neutral. Sarek gave a slight nod and said, "No, Sigeer. No objections. Please ask T'Mal." Spock sensed his father was amused at the snub to T'Pau.

The remainder of the evening was spent in planning the event. Because of the lack of time it would be a simple ceremony, held at Spock's home two days hence with only the family present. Spock would leave later that day.

*

Early on the morning of the ceremonies, Amanda entered her son's bedroom. "Spock, have you considered what you might wear?"

He forced open his eyes and stared at her. When he remembered that all the previous day he had been doing several things at once, just to stay even, he said, "Believe me, Mother, it never crossed my mind." He threw back the blankets and went into the bathroom, leaving her to choose his outfit.

Some time later, wrapped in a towel, he stood in the doorway and watched as Amanda examined the contents of his closet. After inspecting several garments, she chose a long cream-colored, wide-belted tunic with matching trousers. Then she found the maroon sleeveless long-vest and matching boots.

He tried to imagine what she was thinking as she ran her hands over the smooth lenta leather. Her gestures were so sensual. Finally he cleared his throat and she looked up to meet his gaze.

"I could have predicted you would choose that one."

T'Mal took her place and motioned for the couple to approach her. Spock offered his arm to T'Ayrian and together they moved toward the elder and knelt in front of her. She placed her hand on T'Ayrian and together they moved toward the elder and knelt in front of her. She placed her hand on his temple and Spock sensed as T'Mal entered his mind. In this instant she would first check to see that all remnants of Spock's first bonding were eradicated.

Satisfied that this was the case, she joined T'Ayrian to the link. With a sureness of her years of training, she began to focus their minds onto each other and away from hers. Both felt the joining, but the sense of being bombarded with the whole of another's consciousness tended to blur individual thoughts. The result was a mixture of vague perceptions. Now was not the time to explore deeper.

T'Mal was trained to keep her own mind exiled from this meld. She was simply the focal point. The ritual words were spoken, the idea planted, to grow and be called to the surface when 'the time' was upon them. When the meld met with her satisfaction, T'Mal withdrew from it; the bonding was completed.

Ananda went to the pillar and loosened the bindings that held the chimes and bells. Here in the garden the constant breeze off the desert immediately moved them and the air did the work of the absent bell ringers in creating a solemn mood. Spock approached the gong, a smaller version of the one that had stood in the desert. He took the mallet from its hanging place and raised it, signifying his intent. T'Ayrian was correct, he thought. It did give him a sense of relief to know there would be no challenge.

The low tone of the gong vibrated through the garden. It was done.

Sarek came to where the newly-married couple was talking. "It is time, son. Your car is waiting, your gear is aboard."

Spock said his good-byes to everyone in the room, then moved to where T'Ayrian was standing.

"Spock, might I accompany you to the spaceport?"

"If you wish."

Together they went out to the launch

pad. Spock introduced T'Ayrian to his driver. "T'Opa, congratulate me. T'Ayrian has just become my wife."

T'Opa bowed slightly. "May your joining bring joy to you both."

"We thank you. When I have departed, you will take my wife to her parents' home."

T'Opa nodded and seemed casual as she prepared the car for take-off, but Spock caught T'Ayrian eyeing them both. *She does not miss a thing, this wife of mine. A pity, T'Opa, but we shall have to forego our little pleasures. You are too close to home.*

When the car was in the air, T'Ayrian said, "Spock, within the next few weeks your operatives will be reporting to you that I have left my father's house and have taken separate lodging. I tell you this now to assure you that all I wish is to be free of my parents. I have no other motives."

"Indeed. There is room in my family's home."

"I will not trade one set of parents for another."

"I will make no objection, unless given reason."

"You shall find none."

"Where will you go?"

"An apartment near my work."

"Ah, yes. The hydro plant. You shall be continuing?" She nodded. "Why that choice of a career, why not business?"

"I have such training, but I prefer this work."

The car landed. Spock stood and extended his hand in the traditional way. "Until we meet again, my wife."

She met the gesture. "I await your return, my husband."

*

He was out of his seat waiting for the shuttle to land and doing his best to control his anger. *To again have to ask Kirk for emergency leave... What goes on in the head of this female? She leaves her father's house, then informs me she will join Star Fleet. I deal with that idea, and now she has disappeared.*

Spock covered the distance from the launch pad to the house in record time. The guard at the door told him he would find his parents waiting for him in the study.



"T'Ayrian is here, you were in time?" he asked before even greeting his parents.

"Yes," Sarek said. "She was trying to leave Vulcan. We intercepted her before she boarded the liner."

"You questioned her?"

"No, my son. I left that for you. She occupies the guest room. An interesting point... She had her nephew with her. We returned him to his parents."

Spock took the stairs two at a time. She looked up as he entered.

"My husband." The words were a taunt.

"You will explain your actions!"

"I wished to be near you..." The back of his hand caught her across the cheek.

"I will have answers." He moved closer.

"There is no need of force. I shall answer." She sank into a chair.

"This concerns more than just us." He went to the intercom and pressed a button. Sarek joined them, but stayed in the background.

There was no apology in her tone when she spoke. "I needed to get off Vulcan and not call attention to myself. It is also why I pushed for the immediate marriage. I wished to align myself with your clan. I needed your protection."

"You are not very coherent, my wife. Why should you need protection?"

She faced him defiantly, but said nothing.

From the back of the room came Sarek's voice. "The Sukar conspiracy... Could there be a connection?"

"You know of it?" There was genuine surprise in her voice.

"I am aware of what Sukar is plotting. But I see no connection... Sukar... The unknown factor..."

Father and son locked eyes as both recalled their discussion in the privacy of the desert. Sarek had told Spock what he knew. Sukar was planning to eliminate his chief obstacle in the council. He stood to increase his finances tenfold if his expansion plans went unopposed. Sukar's chances were not considered good, and it was known that someone with interplanetary connections conspired with him. Until now it had not been known who that someone was.

"T'Salma! T'Salma is in league with Sukar... They must be secret bondmates. All these years we speculated. It is common knowledge that Sukar and his wife do not share a

bonding. My compliments, they kept their secret well. It also explains much about the marriage between Sigeer and T'Salma. He is so much older, and below her status. As the only heir to her father's trading company she could have made a better match... Sukar and T'Salma... Fascinating... They must have been planning this for years and now, together they make their move."

"And together they die!" T'Ayrian spat out the words. "I have no desire to die with them."

"As Sigeer's daughter you would have his protection..." Spock stopped and stared at her.

T'Ayrian remained defiant. "So there you have it, my husband!"

Spock's eyes narrowed. "You are not Sigeer's child and he knows it. He would not protect you, if indeed he could."

"Protect me? He hates me and wants me dead with them."

"This is why you sought to join Star Fleet. You would be off planet when the attempt took place."

"Yes. It provided a legitimate reason to leave Vulcan. Think, husband, you could align yourself with Sukar, then there would be a chance of..."

"No!" Sarek interrupted angrily. "We pledged our neutrality in this and will not become involved."

"You forget, sir, that if I come safely through this, I have much to offer. As T'Salma's legal heir I inherit a trading company and as Sukar's daughter I have his favor even if he cannot acknowledge me."

Sarek ignored the remark as Spock continued. "Who do you believe opposes you, besides Sigeer?"

"Do not toy with me, husband. When the attempt fails, and we know it will, the reprisals will certainly result in the elimination of my mother's clan. Since I have married you, I should be spared..."

"Then why run?"

"My nephew..."

"So now we have it."

"Yes. He should not have to die because of this. He had no part in its planning. If we went there now, we might get him..."

"No!"

"Is it a coward who speaks?"

"Do not throw words. If our positions

were reversed you would do the same. You view this through emotionalism."

Sarek stood. "Confirm this," he said to Spock, and left the room. A sly smile crept into Spock's eyes as he stared at T'Ayrian. "So, all the talk of pledging faith, of strangers marrying..."

"It is true!"

"You sought my protection."

"You blame me for choosing life? You spoke of reversed positions, place yourself in mine."

"I do not fault you, T'Ayrian. Under the circumstances you did well. You chose a clan neutral in this attempt and one with a status greater than your own."

"I am honored," she said in a voice that would have curdled plomeek.

"But I do not relish being played the fool." If her tone had been sarcastic, his was deadly serious.

"I had no such intention. I do believe our union could be productive--in many ways."

"Then your only motive in running was to save the boy?"

She nodded. "He and I have always been close. It would grieve me deeply to see his life wasted over this."

"What of the rest of your family?"

"I cannot undo that which has been set into motion."

"So you save yourself and the boy."

"That was my hope."

"Not an easy task, my wife. But let us confirm this."

"No..."

"Why do you resist? If you have spoken the truth there is nothing to fear."

"I resent the intrusion."

He jerked her into his arms and could see that the action surprised her. *Vulcans can be so narrow*, he thought as he embraced her. His dual heritage and training had taught him variety. From James Kirk he had learned that there was more than one way to do almost everything. Using that information, he had decided that there should be some very interesting ways to mind link. He held her head and forced his mouth over hers. He felt her anger surge as she struggled for several seconds, then stopped. She was not fool enough to continue at a hopeless task. Still, he admired her for trying. And was sure she would take advantage of

any miscalculation on his part. He was enjoying this match.

Instinct had brought her mental shield into place, but he had no trouble breaking through.

His mind was operating on two levels. One scanned through the information in search of items pertaining to the business at hand. The other, instinctive, was responding to the female in his arms, and these responses manifested themselves in the physical. Automatically, she began responding, then fought to control. He enjoyed her predicament. Vulcan women were so sheltered, so ignorant in these matters. They hadn't the wealth of information available to women in other societies. Mentally, he promised her other delights when there was time.

Satisfied that there was nothing there to contradict what she had told them, he withdrew from her mind. But he continued kissing her. She did not struggle now. Finally he pulled away, gently. "A human custom. Interesting--do you not agree?"

He left the room and spent several hours talking with Sarek.

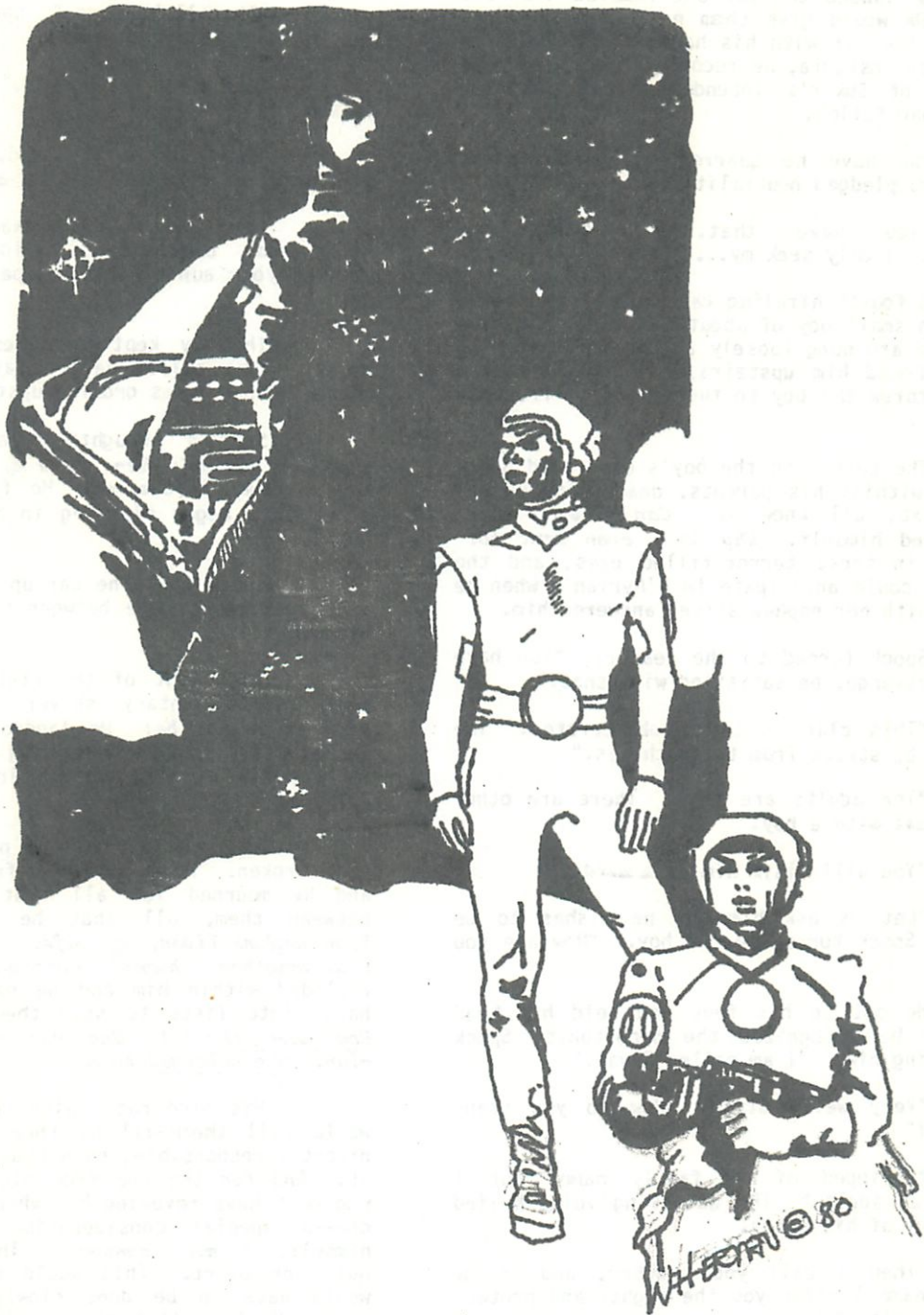
Later, on his way to bed, he passed her door. *Ah, yes...my wife*. He raised his hand to touch the plate and enter the room. No. She would have no desire this night, and he could understand why. He had definite plans for their first time together and no wish to mar that occasion. He would leave her be, would force no more from her tonight. Perhaps, he could comfort her... No, there was not enough trust between them, yet. Someday... But the need was still with him, a residual of their earlier scene. *T'Opa?* No. *I need my rest*. He turned and went to his own room.

Just before dawn Spock felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "Spock, it has begun."

In the next instant he was awake and out of bed. As he pulled on his trousers he said, "I shall tell T'Ayrian." It struck him that his first thoughts were for her.

He went to the guest room to find it empty. "She cannot be far. The guards would have stopped her." But it seemed that T'Ayrian had outwitted them. Spock was amazed, then even more so when a search produced an unconscious guard and T'Opa bound and gagged. They ran for the launch pad and were not surprised to find a stratocar was missing.

Sarek returned to the house to stay in touch with developments at the capitol and Spock took another stratocar to look for T'Ayrian. His first stop was her apartment. When he found it empty he headed the car across the desert to the Umlands and called for directions to her



sister's home.

He spotted a car next to the house and feared he was too late for the boy and his family. But the stolen car was not to be seen. The noise of his approach brought three figures running from the house.

He landed the car and removed his hand weapon. He would give them no excuse to fire. He exited the car with his hands in plain view. By the clan insignia, he recognized these men as hirelings of Sukar's intended victim and knew the coup had failed.

"We have no quarrel with your clan, Spock. You pledged neutrality."

"You have that. I shall not interfere. I only seek my..."

A fourth hireling came out of the house dragging a small boy of about ten turnings. The man's free arm hung loosely at his side, running blood. "Found him upstairs, sir. He attacked me." He threw the boy to the ground in front of the leader.

The terror in the boy's eyes told Spock what lay within: his parents, dead. And he was to be next, all knew it. *Can I stop this?* Spock asked himself. *Why do I even want to?* The look in those terror-filled eyes, and the one Spock could anticipate in T'Ayrian's when he returned with her nephew alive, answered him.

Spock turned to the leader. "You have had your revenge, be satisfied with that."

"This clan is to be obliterated. The name will be struck from the archives."

"The adults are dead. There are other ways to deal with a boy."

"You will claim him as a ward?"

"Let us ask him how he wishes to be judged." Spock turned to the boy. "How are you called?"

He got to his feet and held his head high, for he recognized the opportunity Spock was offering him. "I am called Stvan."

"Very well, Stvan. How do you stand before me?"

"Stripped of my family name, but I stand as an adult." The quivering voice belied the bravery of his words.

"Then I call you brother, and in my father's name I offer you the rights and protection of my clan."

"And I call you brother and accept responsibility, pledging my loyalty to your clan."

"What will you take from this place?"

"Only that which I wear."

"That is wise. And this house?"

"Torch it, and let it stand as a sign that this clan is no more."

"It will be done." Spock turned to the men. "You have witnessed."

"We have witnessed," they said in unison."

"Then it is finished." The four men left while Spock and Stvan set about their task.

They stood back, watching it burn. After some time, Spock said, "Stvan, I am seeking your aunt. I had expected to find her here."

The boy kept his eyes on the burning house. "She called earlier and spoke with my mother. Then I was ordered upstairs."

Spock's thoughts began to race. *If she came directly here from my home, she should have arrived before me.* He forced down a red alert that began clanging in his mind. "Come, boy."

Spock took the car up and began searching the direct route between the boy's home and his own.

The sight of the rising wisp of smoke sent an involuntary shiver down his spine. *No! It cannot be!* He landed his own car and leaped out. As he was running toward the downed vehicle his mind kept repeating the word. *No! No! No!*

He found her in the pilot's chair, her neck broken. He pulled her free and held her, and he mourned for all that would never be between them, all that he had anticipated. *Your nephew lives, my wife, a wedding gift to you...another human custom...* Then rage exploded within him and he had to clench his hands into fists to stop them from trembling. *How dare they!!! She was my wife. Of my clan. She belonged to me.*

His mind raced with thoughts of how he would kill them--all of them. First the ones directly responsible, then those who had ordered it. And for the one from his own organization who must have revealed her whereabouts, for that one--a special consideration. *But, he told himself, I must control.* This could not be quick or overt. This would take planning; it would have to be done slowly and with great care. He knew that they would claim she fired first; that they acted in self-defense. Yes, time. He would take his time, for they had killed his bondmate and he would savor his revenge.

the unwanted son

by Joyce Gasner

The brown bean soup served in the inn was extraordinarily good--which, Lucas Skywalker thought, might account for why the place was so heavily patronized. Served with a generous chunk of dark bread, butter, and hard cheese, the lunch was more than Lucas had hoped for. He had been delayed three days getting back to Alderaan and, his traveling allowance used up, had had to fall back on his status as a knight bachelor to eat. Fortunately the ship on which he had booked passage was scheduled to lift that evening. The charity of the Sith was grudging.

He was relishing the last of his bread and cheese and thinking about asking for a mug of fresh-pressed cider when a mug of the drink appeared on the plank table before him. Looking up, Lucas found himself the object of a young man's interest. Tall, painfully thin, his benefactor was dressed in a rich burgundy-colored tunic and black trousers. The face was pleasant and intelligent. A shock of thick black hair fell over the young man's forehead, his eyes were blue, and he had very pale, milk-white skin.

"Thank you," Lucas said, swallowing the last crumb of cheese. Picking up the mug, he gestured to the chair opposite. "Won't you join me?"

The dining room was full but for the seat opposite Lucas. The young man dipped his head and sat down.

"I'm Lucas Skywalker," Lucas said.

"Darth Vader," the young man responded.

Lucas felt his eyebrows rise but fought to keep his expression neutral. "One of Endrus Vader's sons?" he asked as casually as he could.

"The middle one," Darth said. Lucas didn't miss the bitterness.

"What are you doing here?" Lucas asked before he realized the stupidity of the question.

"Eating lunch," Darth said.

Lucas grinned, and was gratified when Darth grinned back.

"You looked a bit dry," Darth said, gesturing toward Lucas's mug.

"I'm fresh out of credits," Lucas said.

"Don't the Jedi pay you?" Darth asked.

"Not exactly," Lucas said. "I'm given a travel allowance but, because I missed my connecting flight, I missed my flight out. Now I've no money at all."

"Sounds a bit precarious. The Sith don't hold much by the Force."

"No, you people sure as hell don't," Lucas laughed.

"I do," Darth said somberly.

Lucas gazed into Darth's face. "How so?"

"It makes sense--the Force, I mean. I believe it exists."

"On faith?"

Darth shrugged. "I guess so."

Lucas leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered, "Do you want to be a Jedi?"

Darth met Lucas's gaze for a moment, then flushed. "It's got to be better than what I'm doing now."

"And what are you doing now?" Lucas asked.

"Studying electrical engineering," Darth said. "When I'm not in class, I'm working at my father's droid plant. My father believes in practical experience."

"Electrical engineering's not a bad trade."

"I didn't say it was!" Darth exclaimed.

"But anybody can be an electrical engineer, and you don't want to be just anybody," Lucas said. "What makes you think being a Jedi's so wonderful? Here I am, begging meals."

"That's only because this is the Sith. If you can't see it here, it doesn't exist. If it doesn't make money, no one's interested. It's so damned dull."

"Being a Jedi's dull too--most of the time."

"What do you do? I mean, day to day?"

"Well, I get up at the stroke of dawn. Then there's three hours of *ryu*--lightsaber work. After that we study some practical thing we're interested in--the specter of electrical engineering rears its ugly head," Lucas smiled, "--and those of us who are bachelors study the Force. That's exercise of a kind, too, learning to breathe so you can control your mind. It's very frustrating at times, and hellish if you have hemorrhoids."

"Hemorrhoids?" Darth stared.

"Try sitting on a hard wood floor for three hours. If you haven't got hemor-

rhoids when you start, you soon will have."

Darth laughed delightedly.

"Still interested?" Lucas asked.

Darth nodded.

"This is a deadly serious business," Lucas said, his expression somber. "It's all very exciting, thinking about being a Jedi. You get to wear robes and carry a lightsaber and people are respectful and awed. It sounds like a lot of fun. But being a Jedi is a lot of hard work and responsibilities. If you're accepted for study--and my master will want to test you first--you'll be worked so hard the first few months you'll think the masters are trying to kill you. You'll have all you can do to drag yourself to bed. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

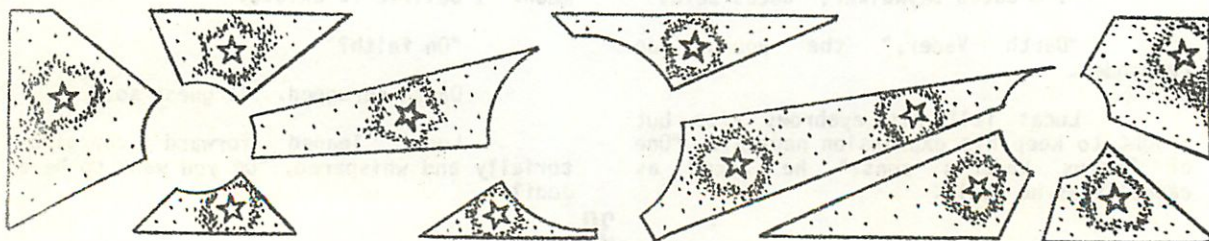
"Yes," Darth said.

"You want to be a Jedi because there's no place for you here. Your older brother will inherit your father's business. Your younger brother gets the title and lands. There's nothing left for poor Darth but being a common slob. Well, no one likes to be a common slob, but that's the way it goes sometimes. You can't run away from your responsibilities. No matter who you are, you have to take it on yourself to accept being what that thing is."

"I understand all that," Darth said. "I really do. I just can't stand the idea of being swallowed up, of disappearing here. I'm somebody too, and I want to be that somebody on my own."

"Give me your address and I'll have the application sent. You'll have to come to Alderaan for the testing. Can you get away?"

"I have money--my own money. I'll come," Darth said with finality.



THE LIOS OF THE SLUA SHEE

geraldine stout

The old chieftain sat in his tent, wondering how long he could retain his name and life. The movement of his men about the central area awakened his initial reservation about using the fortification from out of the depths of time. He knew the old stories, although they were scoffed at as tales to frighten children by the people who followed the new faith.

Scowling, he stood up and strode to the tent's opening. The new faith! It was the source of all his problems and those of his clan. He had ignored its blandishments until he had fallen in love with a woman who had been baptized. For her sake he had listened to that man, had followed his teachings, had had his only son baptized, and, at his wife's insistence, had named him for the man. Padraic! He now wished that he had spitted the man on a spear the first time he had seen him. His son came in and stood, waiting for orders.

"Are the men ready?"

"Aye, father, and they await your word. This place was well made, we may win yet." The chieftain grunted and turned to stare off into space.

"Only ill can take men who use a faery fort..."

"Father! You know that there are no such beings. The Lord is the only one..."

"'Tis because of that thought that we are here, Padraic, with the country and half its clans crying for blood! We've forsaken the old gods for your mother's faith, and now our clan is blamed for everything that goes wrong. I knew, deep in my bones, what that messenger was going to say when he interrupted your marriage feast with tales of approaching blood. So here we are in a faery fort, our womenfolk and your new wife, who is wife in name only, hiding in

the hills, and Death's hounds are belling upon our trail! But the road has been travelled, and here we are for good."

He stood up and went outside to his men. They had dug a trench around the fort and had constructed a strong gate for it. Greetings were called out to him along with cheers--good men all of them. He went up the odd, X-shaped staircase to the top of the wall and gazed morosely out over the countryside, empty except for a returning patrol. The patrol had a prisoner with them.

"Bring the prisoner to me when they arrive." He turned and returned to his tent.

A short while later the prisoner was brought to him; a young woman with grey eyes and hair like a storm cloud. Something deep in the old man's mind screamed as he looked at her, but he buried it angrily. Padraic stood behind her, staring with dilated eyes. The chieftain took his son's disquiet as a reflection of his own.

"A long life to you, O chieftain, and to your men, who rescued me from a patrol of those who pursue you." Her voice was soft and dark. "I ask protection as a traveller until I can reach my kinsmen."

"If you want only to rest a short time, then you may stay here. If you find yourself cut off from your lands, then you may join our women and children where they hide."

"Thank you, no. I will ride on tomorrow, if I may use one of your horses. My own fled when I was captured."

He nodded; then, "Padraic, take her to the extra tent." As the two turned and stepped outside, the chieftain called his son back. "My son...have her watched so

that she does not slip out in the night to call our pursuers."

Padraic caught up to the woman and walked with her to the tent. "Pardon my father's brusqueness, lady, but he has much on his mind. What is your name?"

"I am called Lios."

"Lios? That is a strange name. That is what the aged ones call these old forts."

"I was born in one."

All that evening he stayed close to Lios, talking to her and listening to her voice.

"Why did your people begin to follow the southern lands' god, Padraic?"

"His priest came and spoke to my mother's father in the great hall. He would have thrown him out, but a cross of light appeared upon the wall. My father believed because my mother did. Lios, have you a man?"

"No, no one would ever pay willingly the price that my father has set upon me."

"The price?"

"All things must be paid for, Padraic. Your people have been driven from their lands for following the new god. I wander, never content for long in one place as my payment for my powers."

"You are a wise woman? You seem too young and beautiful for that."

Lios smiled upon him, and a cloud swirled in his mind, destroying all things except for her. "The compensations are greater than the price..."

He reached out, pulling her to him. "No price is greater than your worth, Lios."

The morning dawned gray, with storm clouds swirling low overhead. The old chieftain stood with his son and the woman in the center of the fort, listening to the scout's report.

"Three more clans have joined them. We are badly outnumbered."

The woman turned to the chieftain. "My people won't be bothered by this force. Because of your hospitality, even in your troubles, they will help you."

"You told me that you lived far from here, lady. How could you reach them in time?"

"Your man has sharp eyes. Not only did he bring you information, he also saw and caught my horse, which was no easy task. I have been called a wise woman, and my horse is no normal one, my lord." She turned to her beast, a white mare with reddish ears.

"A faery horse!" Awe crawled over his skin, and the hair rose on the nape of his neck. "You have the power to harness this?"

She mounted, then smiled down at him. "Power? Aye, perhaps it could be called such. Ask your son, my lord chief."

Confusion and a fear of approaching fate tumbled, uncontrolled, inside his mind. He stared at his son, then pushed the emotions down, blindly refusing to consider what was happening. He turned back to the woman. "Hospitality does not warrant war, lady."

"My father may demand some small fee, but he is a reasonable man. Come mare, we have a long way to go!" She spurred the horse, which leapt away at startling speed.

"Farewell, Lios," his son called after her.

"What did you call her?"

"Lios. She said it was her name. Why?"

"Lios..." The chieftain looked around him. Suddenly, the walls surrounding them appeared to darken, and he felt like a cornered stag. "No mortal name..."

It was the fourth hour of battle when the hosts that Lios had promised came. The followers of the old gods screamed and ran when they beheld the white stallions and warriors of the Slua Shee. Little further killing was needed, as they knew better than to fight such beings, and contented themselves with running.

Feeling a sick wrenching inside, the chieftain stood before the King of the Slua Shee. He knew full well that the faery folk had no love for a man who used their land as he had.

The dark king sat stilly on his horse, staring down at the man before him. "You have reviled our brothers, the old gods, have used our fort as your own, and your son has lain with my daughter. My daughter, however, has kind words for you, so I will not take your life in payment for the first two debts. The last will be paid

for. The price for my daughter's love is, and forever will be, complete faithfulness to her by your son. Farewell, chieftain."

With that, he whirled his horse away. The chieftain, old now, too, too old, watched his son run forward, begging to be taken with the Slua Shee. The king stopped and laughed down into Padraic's face. "What? And you a married man? What would your god say? I have a prince of my own people who has agreed to pay the price also. It is not often that I can get something paid for twice over!" His horse leapt away after his troops.

Padraic cried out, "But I cannot bear even the thought of another woman but Lios!"

Suddenly, the screaming that ran deep in the chieftain's mind surfaced in the warning words of a verse, long in his family, that he had heard at his old nurse's knee sixty years ago:

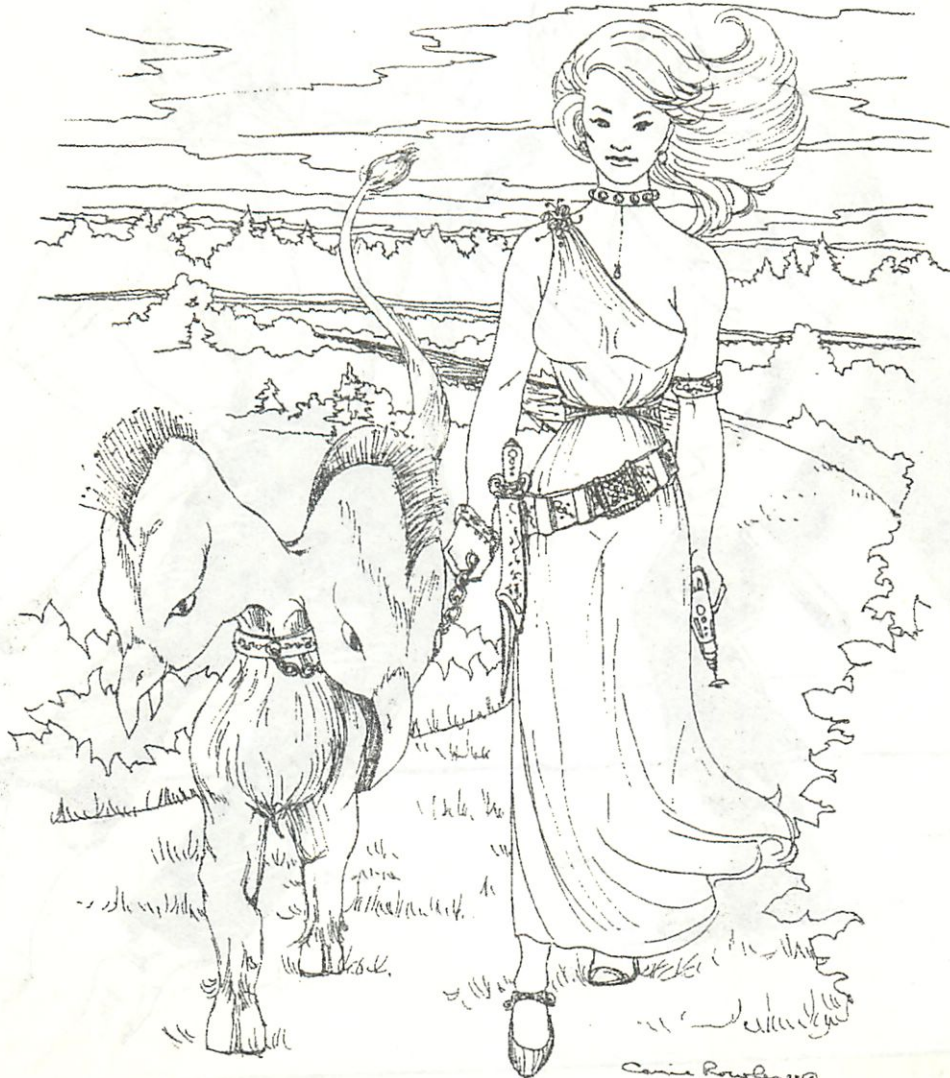
Beware the Lios of the Slua Shee,
For its use, the faery demands full pay.
Life for life, or like demanded
And the line of a clan is fully ended.

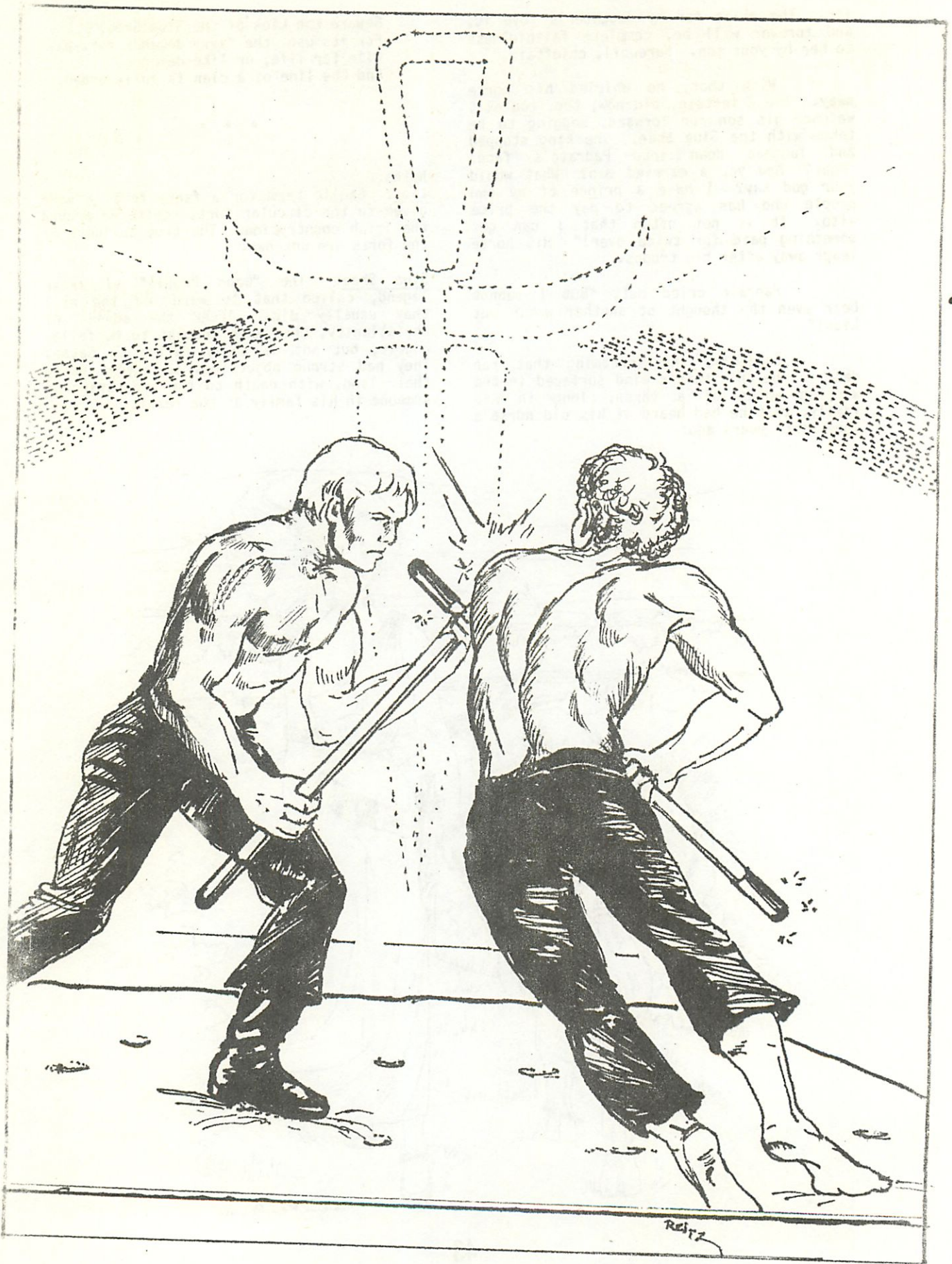
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Notes:

Lios: Gaelic term for a faery fort, a name given to the circular forts scattered around the Irish countryside. The true builders of the forts are unknown.

Slua Shee: The "Good People" of Irish legend, called that to ward off the evil they usually did. After the advent of Christianity, they were thought to be fallen angels, but not as badly fallen as Satan. They had strong objections to anyone using their land, with death to the trespasser or someone in his family as the result.





Through the Eye of the Tiger...

Bonnie Reitz

The Commander stopped to watch some of the crew work out in the ship's gym. He had status reports to go over before he went to the bridge, but he could ignore them for a few minutes. One of the techs and a security man, Agana Cymbe, were sparring with shock sticks turned on low. The four-foot long rods were equipped with live metal ends which could inflict a shock from barely perceptible to full stun.

The black, Cymbe, was a master with the weapon; those of the human crew who tried to throw him from first position ended up on the floor. Now Kirk watched him cut under the tech's guard and touch the rod tip to his arm. The shock sent the rod out of the tech's hand and a dropped stick was game and point.

Cymbe helped the tech up from the floor and slapped his shoulder. "Good bout, Rhys," he laughed as the other grimaced. He turned and caught sight of Kirk. "Commander? What about a round, sir?"

Kirk grinned and lifted an arm. Rhys threw him the other stick and he moved into the game square. Cymbe sparred naked to the waist, to give his opponent a chance to touch his skin with the rod, a hope rarely realized. Clothing absorbed at least part of the charge. To even the odds, Kirk stripped off his uniform top. The rest of the crew in the gym stopped what they were doing and came to stand outside the square in anticipation of what should be a spectacular bout.

Both men flicked the charge on full and power crackled into the ends of the rods. War Commander Kirk warily crouched and circled, matching the black move for move. Cymbe feinted half-heartedly and was countered without effort. He was feeling out the commander's guard with his seemingly aimless taps. His rod touched Kirk's again, then in a blur reversed and speared

forward. Kirk's own stick flew under and spun around it. He ducked fast as the other's live end whipped up to his head.

From then on they fought without stopping, with a speed that the onlookers couldn't follow. The two rods exploded sparks as the live ends contacted each other. Cymbe was fighting the way only a professional would: low, where his opponent had a hard time countering the lunges, but which left his own upper body exposed in the target area.

Kirk caught the rod on one of those lunges, yanked back and upthrust his foot as they fell back on the mat, hurling the black over his head in a roll. Had he been a split-second later, the stabbed-down rod would have caught him full, but Kirk jerked sideways and it missed him by a hair's breadth. He went to his knees and feet in the same roll and attacked.

His rod caught Cymbe under the ribs and slammed him back against the wall from the jolt, out of the marked square. By the rules, Cymbe was judged fled and the round went to a sweating, triumphant Kirk.

He and another crewman pulled Cymbe to his feet. Kirk grinned. "Somebody throw a bucket of water on him."

When the sputtering security man was fully conscious again, he reached out and grasped the commander's wrist as sign there was no grudge between them for his defeat. Kirk acknowledged. That was vital--if a loser bore a grudge, an honor battle could result, and Kirk tried to keep those to a minimum aboard his ship. The U.P.C. *Enterprise* was the most efficient battleship in the fleet because of that iron command. The assassination attempts for his position were few.

Kirk showered briefly and went to the bridge. In the corridor outside the lift he met Spock; the Vulcan's face was set in coldly disapproving lines. Only his first officer ever dared to criticize his actions. As they rode up, Spock stated, "It is a risk to accept the challenge of a shock stick battle before others, Commander. Some day he may defeat you, in front of the rest."

Kirk was not surprised he knew of it. "Spock, if I can be defeated in battle, then I should not be in command of a ship," he said flatly.

Spock digested that, then nodded. "Indeed."

They stepped onto the bridge and his Cait third officer saluted and relinquished the command chair to him. "We have just picked up a curious sensor reading, Commander. Lt. Narin is attempting to resolve those readouts."

Spock went over to the science station and the Klingon woman released the viewer, running over her findings with the Vulcan.

"What sort of readings? Have you a visual?" Kirk asked.

M'riss purred an order to the Klingon helmsman and Korek snapped on a port screen, under high magnification. An area the size of half a fist shimmered faintly against black space: yellow, with glimmerings of blue and green.

Kirk frowned. They were exploring unknown space and the object had to be investigated. "Alter course toward it, Mr. Korek; maintain sensor alert."

As the *Enterprise* swept in closer, the object expanded on the screen, the blue color becoming more visible. It resembled the fiery heart of the Doomsday machine, but it had no outer containment structure. That faint chord of memory sounded alarm bells of extreme caution in Kirk's mind and he ordered a halt to their approach. "Spock, have you determined its structure?"

The expressionless Vulcan lifted his bearded head from the viewer. "I have determined what it is not, Commander. It cannot be natural in origin. The force which holds the anomaly to its spherical shape is an artificial magnetic field. Its interior defies analysis. Sensors are unable to ascertain a fixed point of reference, as if space, and reality itself, are shifting within it."

"Artificial. But what is it for? A weapon?"

"Unknown. If a ship were to enter that central area, it would undoubtedly be destroyed."

"Commander--" the helmsman called, his hands rapidly pressing the buttons across the panel. "We are drifting inward, even though the engines are stopped."

"Impulse power--reverse course."

"Aye, sir." The Klingon shifted his hands. "Commander! We are drifting even faster--"

"Warp engines! Spock--"

"There is no indication of a gravity field, yet we are very definitely being pulled toward the object. The warp engines are ineffective--we are accelerating."

Kirk stood. "Full power."

The deck of the *Enterprise* vibrated under them as the engines strained against the drawing force. The ship reversed and tried to break free with the full power of its hyper-warp drive pointed toward the anomaly. The space in front of the ship glowed and then flared in two backward-curving horns of blazing light, like a powerboat's bow splitting water.

"Commander! We cannot continue this," Spock cried above the howling engines. "We will destroy ourselves..."

"Cut engines--" As soon as engineering complied with his orders, the vibration of the ship lowered, then halted.

"Commander, we are being pulled with less speed now than when the engines were on full power."

"That's impossible, Spock," he snapped.

"So is the existence of such an anomaly. Yet it is there. I believe as long as we do not resist, we will be drawn in at a slow, regular rate."

"But still drawn." Kirk ordered the ship turned round to face it again. The glowing eye looked more like an open maw now, to swallow them. "Armsmaster--prepare full photon torpedos to be launched into its center."

Sulu charged the weapons and, at Kirk's order, fired them directly into the distant circle. As soon as they hit the shifting energy of light they vanished without effect.

"Fascinating," Spock muttered. "The torpedos did not dissipate upon entrance, but simply--went elsewhere."

"Where?" Kirk demanded.

"I do not know. Space is so disrupted there, they may have been thrown

into another universe entirely. We have no way of knowing."

"We'll know when we fall into it ourselves," Kirk snarled between his teeth. "Spock, I want answers. Korek, is our flank speed affected by the pull?"

The Klingon experimented. "No, sir--only reverse course."

"Set us into an orbit; it may delay us."

"A gradually decaying orbit," Spock said.

"Better than a direct-in plunge, Spock."

The *Enterprise* continued to fall inward, despite their desperate attempts at freeing her or destroying the now-blazing mouth.

"The interior is impervious to our weapons," Spock reported. "We must try to concentrate on breaking the containment field."

The ship fired its full complement of weapons into the anomaly's outer surface. The explosion that reflected instants later blinded them. Kirk heard Spock cry out, "--still there, Commander--" But the commander was no longer there himself. He felt himself flung spinning outward, into twisted space.

Kirk rolled, hit the wall, and lay stunned for a few seconds until his vision cleared from the blinding green light. Blinking, he heaved himself to one elbow, his other hand bracing against the wall. What the hell-- He was in a corridor. He staggered to his feet and looked around, incredulous. It looked like level 5, near engineering. In that unknown backwash, he had somehow gone through solid bulkhead and floor. The ship--

He moved swiftly to a wall com and lifted his hand to slam it on--then jerked it back, hovering over the button. The instrument was voice only--it had no visual screen. For a moment his eyes narrowed and his nostrils expanded, like an animal's, in wariness. Impossible! Yet...

Slowly, he drew his hand back, casting a swift glance down both sides of the corridor. Yet so was passage through solid metal impossible; but transporting was not. A trick? No, the anomaly had been real, beyond even the Vegans' creation. The *Enterprise* was in deadly peril and this was the *Enterprise*. Or was it? Instinct and wariness kept him from going to the bridge before he knew what happened.

The Tiger-Fox turned and strode openly down the corridor to the lift, his senses set for battle.

The two crewmen who stepped out of the lift goggled at his uniform, with knife in the sash belt and phaser at his hip. "Captain...?" one of them got out.

He swiftly lifted his hands to their necks and they both dropped soundlessly. Just as swiftly, he pulled them into a vacant compartment and crouched down, searched for weapons. Neither man bore a knife under the familiar tunics and Kirk scowled. The fact that they had no honor-blades convinced him, more than the com unit, that he was not on his own ship. Yet they had acknowledged his face--therefore he must have a duplicate here, and that Kirk he would like to meet. The edges of his teeth showed in a fighting clench. 'Captain', not Commander. He would have to remember that. Had the anomaly hurled him into another universe? Another *Enterprise* and another Kirk? But why him alone?

He did not go to the bridge. If that impossible fact were true, he did not know who in this ship was his enemy. He went to the captain's cabin and it opened to his hand. Again the faint smile.

Before signalling the bridge, the War Commander wondered what effect his voice--Kirk's voice--would have on the bridge crew. He obviously rocked them. "Captain! Y're alive! Where the dev'l are ye?" That lapse into brogue had to be an elated Engineer Scott, whose questions were echoed by Spock's level "Captain, Mr. Scott's sentiments are my own. What is your position at the moment? We lost you as you transported up from the planet."

"In my cabin. I was transported into a lower corridor and I want to know why and how." His answers were curt. "Come to my cabin, Spock."

"Captain, there is a Klingon ship within sensor range."

That fact meant nothing to the alternate Kirk; the Klingons were their allies against the Vegans. What mattered was his own ship. "Now."

When Spock entered the cabin to a curt, "Come--", the room was dark save for a low desk light. The captain was in the rear, in shadows. "Captain?" Spock stood with his hands behind his back. "Are you suffering any ill effects from the accidental transporting?"

Kirk stared at him: the different uniform, the missing weapons, and most convincing of all--the lack of any beard whatsoever. "Ahhh..." The sound was one of

pain and discovery. "I thought something like..." He rose as he spoke and moved out into the light, revealing the uniform.

The Vulcan's hand went to the com. "Security to the captain's cabin--"

"That isn't necessary." His voice was hard, authoritative. "There is no war between us. My only concern is the safety of my ship and this is not it. I have been through the crew list--there are no Klingon names on it."

"Forgive me, Captain, but precautions must be taken. We have had a meeting before with an alternate-world captain."

"Blast it, Spock." He came forward. "I have no patience for Vulcan caution now. I left my ship fighting for its life and I must get back to it. If you don't aid me willingly, I must force--"

The door hissed open and three security men stepped in, blinking briefly at seeing the alternate Kirk.

"I will do all in my power to aid your return, Captain," Spock stated. "But first I must make certain you pose no threat to our own *Enterprise*. If you will go peacefully with the security men?"

"Those are security men?" he exclaimed, astonished in spite of his fear for his own ship. He laughed out loud.

"They are sufficient here. Captain, please surrender your weapons willingly." Kirk could see Spock collating data, making a swift judgment. "It is a necessary precaution, not a loss of face in our eyes." When Kirk's eyes narrowed dangerously, he added, "Please, Captain, the sooner we learn of your origin, the sooner we can try to transport you back."

With a stiffly proud glare, Kirk unfastened his phaser. When Spock stared pointedly at the curved knife in his sash, his head went up. "That I will not do--it is an honor-blade. If they try to remove it, I will kill them."

Spock nodded. "Gentlemen, if you will escort the captain to the brig--"

They moved forward, phasers drawn. The instant they were in the corridor, Kirk flung himself backward into the man behind him, his arm knocking the weapon upward. In the same sinuous motion, his foot lashed out at the second man, breaking the arm and sending the phaser skidding across the floor. The one at his side was no problem--he moved far too slowly and the Vulcan nerve pinch caught him in mid-turn.

Spock shot him in the back with a phaser on stun.

When he woke from the blackness, he was on a wall couch in the brig. He rolled to his feet and faced the Vulcan standing calmly at the door, then realized he still had his honor knife in his sash. Frowning, he looked at Spock, his hand resting on its hilt.

"I would not allow them to take it from you."

The face that was darker than Kirk's own smiled slightly. "You are a perceptive man in both universes, Spock. But I must get back to my ship."

"And we must have our own captain back."

"Back?"

"Two Kirks cannot co-exist. You have exchanged places."

"What!" He lunged to the front of the brig and was thrown back by the shock of the guard field. "He won't be able to run my ship!"

"Our captain is extremely resourceful." He frowned. "You have burned your hands. Dr. McCoy will see to those when he ascertains you have no ill effects from the stunning. I regret having had to do so."

Puzzled, Kirk stared at him until McCoy came walking swiftly down the corridor. The instant the doctor saw the uniform, his eyes widened in shock. "No!"

Kirk's mouth smiled wryly, remembering Spock had told him they had met an alternate Kirk before. "The thought of another 'me' is unnerving--the idea of more than one is almost obscene."

"Spock!" The doctor turned to the Vulcan. "You expect me to examine this madman without a stunner?"

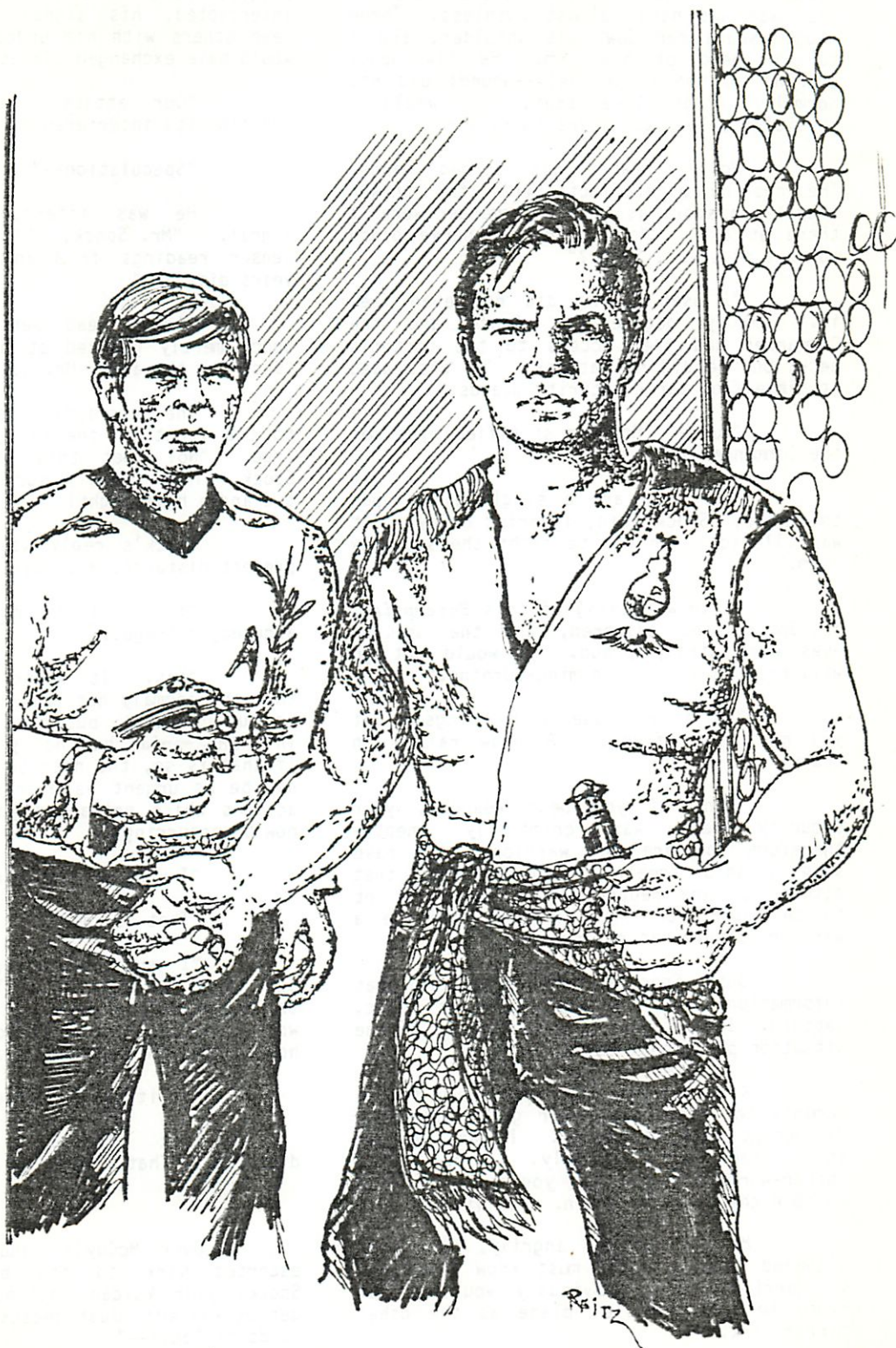
Kirk's brows rose, but he made no further motion.

"This is not the same mirror-Kirk we encountered before, Doctor." He faced the War Commander fully. "Have I your word you will not harm the doctor?" he asked Kirk.

"Yes."

"You trust his word, Spock?" McCoy sputtered. "A barbarian like--damnit, he has a knife!"

"He will not use it," Spock stated confidently. Kirk's eyes were amused and bright as they went from the Vulcan to the doctor.



One of the security guards switched off the field long enough for McCoy to enter. He went through his examination in an angry fashion, but underneath was a wariness that did not fool Kirk. He knew the readings would be familiar, but he was not this universe's Kirk. The expression in his eyes was hard, almost ruthless. Three ridged scars ran down his shoulder, almost to the bend of his arm. He saw Spock staring at those curiously--wounds did not normally ridge like that, nor would a physician allow such scars to remain.

McCoy treated his burned hands. "He has no aftereffects from the phaser stun." He spoke as if the Commander weren't there at all. "Your overrated nerve pinch run out of steam, Spock?"

"I used it--he did not even feel it." McCoy goggled at Spock and the Commander had free access to the doctor's neck, but he did not attack. "He also used it himself on three security guards."

"But--" McCoy's stupefied eyes met the Commander's.

"Sir, you are a single alien upon this ship," Spock said, ignoring McCoy. "It was illogical for you to fight the security team."

"I know nothing of this *Enterprise*, Mr. Spock," he answered, and the un-Kirk eyes were steely proud. "I would not go willingly to a possible mind-burning."

"We do not use such things. Yet you no longer fight." A brow raised in query.

"None of you bear weapons, your security team was criminally inept--therefore you are not warriors. To have such a ship freely in space means that either you are neutrals--and therefore not to be fought--or that in your universe a warrior culture has not evolved."

Both Spock's brows rose at that information. "A flawless train of logic, Captain. I find your calm acceptance of the situation phenomenal for a human."

Kirk's eyes narrowed and for a moment, the dangerous tiger glint appeared. "I accept nothing, Spock. I want my own ship back--and swiftly. You said 'other-world Kirks'--then you must know how to open the gateways again. You will do so."

McCoy stood up angrily, but Spock answered levelly. "We must know first how you arrived here. Obviously you are not from the same parallel plane as the other mirror Kirk."

Kirk saw the logic in that and, tersely, related the events which had caught the mirror-*Enterprise* unaware.

"I see," Spock mused. "Our *Enterprise* was conducting a planetary survey when Mr. Scott reported transporter interference. The edge of the anomaly may have been responsible for such an effect. Captain Kirk was the last to leave the planet, and his transport beam was interrupted, his signal lost. Had there been others with him undoubtedly they, too, would have exchanged places."

"Our attacking blast jolted it, boosting its interference," Kirk said.

"Speculation--"

He was interrupted by the com signal. "Mr. Spock, I'm getting unusual sensor readings from an area three light years distant."

Kirk's head went up sharply and Spock merely glanced at him before asking, "Describe the area, Mr. Sulu."

The description sent Kirk once more to the front of the brig, trying to break free. "No! Get this ship out of here, Spock. That anomaly sucked my ship in at two and a half light!"

Spock's reply was calm. "Maintain present distance, Mr. Sulu."

"You're listening to him?" McCoy accused, outraged.

"Yes. It would seem, Commander, that the anomaly not only hurled you through to our universe, but back in time as well. This *Enterprise* has not yet encountered it. If that is so, the need to send you back may not be as urgent as events put forth. The actions which entrapped your ship may only now be occurring."

"I want on the bridge, Spock."

"That is im--"

"I want on the bridge," he lashed out in a hard voice. "I know what that thing can do and what actions damned us. I want close to those sensors, to determine how to open that gateway again."

"If it can be reopened."

Kirk reacted to that with distaste. "That I will not accept."

Over McCoy's loud protests, Spock escorted Kirk to the bridge. "Damnit, Spock, your Vulcan instincts are going to get us killed! Just because he spouts a few words of logic--"

"Dr. McCoy, I do not base my decisions on such a tenuous base as instinct. Logic dictates that we draw upon

this man's knowledge of the anomaly, to attempt to regain our own captain."

On the bridge, Kirk found the absence of Klingons unfamiliar, as was the set-up of the controls. "Report--Mr. Sulu?"

"We are maintaining our distance from the object; sensors are unable to gain an accurate reading of its composition. The Klingon vessel is still in its previous position."

"Klingon? Maybe the two of us can work out a plan to destroy it. Call their commander."

"A Klingon help us?" McCoy snorted. "Those butchers would shove us into it."

For a second, Kirk stared at him, confused.

Spock explained. "In this universe, Commander, the Klingons are the enemies of the Federation."

"En--!"

"I think you referred to them as part of your crew?"

"We've been allies for 200 years. Enemies?" It was difficult for him to believe. "Your Kirk will never hold my ship," he said grimly.

"Allies?" McCoy cried in tones of outrage.

"They are my best warriors. We do not share your enemies, Dr. McCoy. We have more than enough of our own. Very well, if there is the chance of battle, then I must know how this *Enterprise* moves. Sulu, you will execute a series of maneuvers on my orders."

Sulu glanced at Spock, then turned to his helm. "Aye, sir. Ready to execute."

"What happens if the Klingons pick those up?" McCoy demanded.

"They will wonder greatly what we are doing," Kirk answered without turning. "I see no reason for your presence on a military bridge, Doctor. Especially if war is probable. You will go below."

Open-mouthed, McCoy sputtered.

"I am not used to repeating orders, Doctor. Since I am not in my own universe, where swift action would follow, I will make allowances. But do not make me repeat myself a third time."

McCoy glared furiously at Spock, then turned on his heel and left.

"Our ways are different," Spock said.

"They waste time--a captain must be obeyed, and instantly, or he could lose both ship and crew. Now, Mr. Sulu, bring us around in a full turn to port, half speed." He had already dismissed McCoy from his mind.

For the next twenty minutes, the War Commander learned swiftly about this ship that was so subtly different from his own. The bridge crew obeyed his commands, yet he could sense them surreptitiously watching him. He grinned to himself. It must be eerie, knowing he was not their Kirk, even though the face and body were alike. He handled the *Enterprise* as readily as Kirk, yet underneath shone a streak of ruthlessness born of a warrior race. He sat in the command chair, watching the screen with an intensity akin to a tiger gathering muscle for a killing spring.

When he came forward, to check the engineering panel readouts against the ship's maneuvers, the difference was more pronounced. He did not move like Kirk, but was more animal-like and supple.

"Sir, is it permitted to know how you obtained those scars?" Spock asked politely.

Kirk's hand went to them, lightly fingering the ridges as he spoke. "They are Cait claws, given in a Blood Honor relationship."

"I see. There are historical records of the Cait doing so with each other, to end warring factions. But I have never heard of it exchanged with outsiders."

"Rarely," he answered and his teeth showed white against the darker skin.

"Captain!" Sulu cried.

Kirk glanced at the screen. "Hard to port, warp 5."

The photon spheres that came barreling out of the anomaly's mouth missed them and hurled toward the distant Klingon ship, their energy undiminished.

"Photon torpedos," Sulu reported excitedly. "But on an unheard of scale--"

"They're ours," Kirk stated grimly. "You were right, Spock, events in my past are happening now. Those photon blasts vanished into the anomaly more than twelve hours before I came through."

"Yours? But--" Sulu was incredulous. "But, sir, our *Enterprise* hasn't got anything with the power of those."

"They are necessary. But that doesn't matter now. If time is catching up

with us, then you must find a way to return me. Your sensor readings on the anomaly, Spock?"

Spock bent to his viewer. "I am attempting to analyze the structure of the containment field. However, we have a closer problem, Commander. The Klingon ship is now heading at full speed toward us. It may think we were the ones to fire at it."

"Open a hailing link," he ordered Uhura. "This is the--" he hesitated, omitting prefixes, "*Enterprise*, Kirk commanding. You have been attacked from an area of disrupted space ahead of us, possibly the remaining effect of an ancient weapon. Do not approach closer."

"You expect me to believe that, Kirk?" An outraged Klingon face exploded onto the screen. "You have committed an act of war and we will destroy you." He cut off and could not be raised again.

Battle Kirk understood well. "Shields. Armsmaster, full weapons."

Sulu turned around and Kirk could see puzzlement on his face. The commander frowned. What else should Sulu be called but "armsmaster"? "Photon torpedos locked in, sir," said the oriental officer.

The two ships met in battle and the Klingon captain attacked with a fury that refused reason. The *Enterprise* was the first to realize it could only maneuver toward the anomaly--it could not retreat.

"We are caught in the anomaly's field," Spock reported.

"Damn that fool!" Kirk raged. "Get me that captain!" he ordered Uhura savagely. "I don't care if you blast his ears off with a signal--get him."

The same Klingon face came onto the screen. "I am Keless. Do you surrender, Kirk, to call so frantically?"

"I am not Captain Kirk," he snarled suddenly in Klingonese. "I am War Commander James Keyen Kirk of an alternate universe, and I do not tolerate stupidity from ally or enemy. And you are stupid, Keless, for letting hatred blind you to imminent danger. Through your actions, the anomaly has caught us both in its pull and there is no breaking free of it. Break off your attack, fool, or we'll both be destroyed."

"Break off because some human captain has gone mad? Trapped? The only trapped one is you and we will do the destroying," he said, his lips pulled back. "I do not believe in this other universe lie--"

"I don't care what you believe."

The anomaly sucks in ships and we're caught. If you try to reverse course, you'll learn that for yourself."

"Reverse course?" he sneered. "So you know where the next photon torpedo is to be aimed?"

"Do you see the knife I wear?" Kirk asked, moving his arm back so it was readily visible. The Klingon's breath sucked in as he recognized an honor-blade, drawn only on insult and sheathed only when blood was satisfied.

"That is a Klingon blade! Where--"

Kirk's sharp hand cut him short. "In my universe, all warriors wear these. The custom is Klingon, so you are well aware of its purpose, Keless." He wrapped his hand around its hilt. "Reverse your course. I will not fire on you."

An oath spoken thus was inviolate, but Keless hesitated longer, and Kirk knew he did not trust a human's honor even spoken so. Then the Klingon lifted a hand and gave a short order to his helm.

"The Klingon ship is altering course, Cap--Commander," Sulu reported.

"Energy fields are at maximum." Spock studied his viewer. "They are increasing power, but not succeeding in breaking free of the anomaly's influence. If they continue to use such power levels, they will overload."

"Cut your engines," Kirk ordered Keless.

Keless gave a half-angry, half-fearful glance to him and seemed to realize he spoke the truth. He swiftly ordered the ship to full stop. Both vessels drifted slowly inward. "Now what, Kirk?" he demanded, angrily.

"We can't pull back, but otherwise our motions are unchecked. It may be possible, if we have enough thrust, to orbit the anomaly at a speed which could break us free using its own gravity as thrust."

"Ah." Keless swiftly bent to discuss that proposal with his science officer.

Spock came to stand beside Kirk. "A feasible solution, Commander, but the power in each of our ships will not be sufficient for such an endeavor. If I may suggest--once before a Klingon ship was joined to the *Enterprise* to use full power to break free of a dimensional trap."

"Joined? Get me everything pertaining to that incident, Spock. Keless, you heard?"

"I heard," he said flatly. "I will not agree with him unless it is absolutely necessary. We will try to break free on our own first."

"This may not be my universe," Kirk answered in a hard voice, "but a Vulcan is never mistaken. It's impossible singly. Once I've read these reports, you will beam over engineers to initiate it. I will do the same."

"Who are you to order me, Kirk who is not even Kirk?"

"I am a War Commander and I will be obeyed. A copy of these tapes will be sent to you at once. Cut off transmission." He stood and turned as the screen went blank. "Those reports?"

Kirk frowned over the logs of the Delta Triangle incident. He would not leave the bridge, so he and Spock were bent over the engineering panel with Engineer Scott. "Treachery..."

"We must be prepared for it again."

The mirror-Kirk's eyes met Scott's, and the tiger's cunning was in them. "Mr. Scott, you will prepare a photon bomb, concealed in your joining apparatus, to be planted on the Klingon ship."

"Captain! Ye can't--" Scott cried out in astonishment.

At Kirk's puzzled frown, Spock explained. "We are not officially at war here-- any overt act will not be countenanced."

"Yet they have done so. Why are you forbidden from doing the same? Are you afraid of war?" he asked with scorn.

"It is to our advantage to avoid it, Commander."

"Ch'ih," he spat and could see that Scott was disconcerted to know it was a Klingon expression. "Very well, if I am forced to play under your foolish rules then I will do so, but it is not worthy of a warrior. Can you substitute a paralyzing but non-lethal gas for the explosive components, Mr. Scott? We'll use it as a bluff, claiming a second device that will destroy their ship if they do not obey orders."

Scotty grinned wolfishly. "Aye! It'll scare the bejeebers out o' them--"

Kirk's lips went back in amusement. "Do it in tight secrecy. They'll expect you, as Chief Engineer, to oversee the joining."

"My men will get on it instantly, Captain."

"Good." Kirk straightened. "Go."

Kirk met the Klingon captain face to face and the other angrily yet warily weighed this new, unknown commander.

"Last time, Keless, your race tried sabotage. Do not try it this time, or I will make certain you don't survive the attempt."

"A threat?" Keless sneered. "From a weak-veined Federationer?"

"A threat--from an Imperial War Commander."

The Klingon reacted. Before his hand reached his disruptor, Kirk's phaser was out in a blur. "You are not challenging a human of this universe, Keless. I will kill you."

"A human would not dare!"

"No." Kirk smiled slowly. "We are warrior kin. Alike enough to ally in my universe. The hunt and the battle are all. This crew and ship are not mine, but mine is trapped in the anomaly and if I can release it, I will kill to do so, with or without my return. Do we draw, Captain?" The grin was a hunting smile.

The Klingon smiled slowly. "I wonder what you would be like in this world, Kirk..."

Behind Kirk's humorless stretching of the lips, he was well aware of the feral flash in the captain's eyes. So the Klingon planned sabotage in spite of warnings? Perhaps he could be excused, if only because he believed he was dealing with the same kind of human as before.

Once alone, he stopped the first crewman he saw. "Is there a Lanthrin Salovar in this *Enterprise's* crew?"

"I'll check, sir."

"Have him come at once to my cabin."

"Sir?" The young ensign faced the war commander uncertainly.

"In my universe, you are my most skilled thief. Can you equal that here?"

He appeared flabbergasted. "I--No, sir! I dabble in sleight-of-hand, but--"

"I need more than dabbling, Ensign," Kirk said sharply and stood. "Can

you remove something from the Klingon captain without notice?"

"I--I don't--What, sir?"

"His knife." Kirk put on a different knife, other than his own honor-blade, and showed him how and where under the tunic it was worn. "Take it from me."

On the fourth try, the ensign bumped into Kirk and palmed the knife. Kirk grinned. "Good. Your life depends on duplicating that. Practice it well."

"But-- How will I bump into him without him slicing my head off?"

The Tiger-Fox grinned again, slowly. "Oh, we'll think of a way..."

The two captains were standing near the kneeling engineers making the first cuts into the *Enterprise's* bulkheads, when a far door hissed back, billowing acrid smoke. "Coolant leak!" one man cried, carrying out a reeling engineer. They staggered into the Klingon captain and Kirk had to steady them.

"Get him to sick bay, fast." His hand slammed into the com button, and while a third crewman ran out, coughing, no one saw him press it a second time, turning it off. "Damage control to Level 8--phaser coolant leak." Meanwhile, the last crewman sealed the door on the harmless smoke, and other *Enterprise* security guards came running. "We'll have to get out of this area, Captain. Order your men out." Keless did so, and turned. He made a sudden, inarticulate noise and reached for his honor-blade, which should have been hidden under his tunic.

"Problems, Keless?" Kirk smiled without humor.

"You--" Kirk's hand suddenly clamped on the Klingon's forearm as he went for his phaser; he held the same tight smile.

"Shall I tell your men what the fuss is about?" he asked softly. Keless stiffened and his arm jerked, but he still couldn't break free of Kirk's grip. "If you tell one of your men to stab me in the back, you'll never learn where it is now."

Loss of an honor-blade was the highest shame to which a Klingon could succumb. Keless cursed then, in Klingonese, vehemently, yet low enough so the others could not hear.

"With it in my possession, I know you won't try anything, Keless. You would never live down its loss."

"I will kill you for this, Kirk!"

he hissed.

"It is your right to attempt it," the war commander said, his face cold. "You will do as I say, Captain, and perhaps in the end I will return your honor to you."

Again the Klingon cursed.

When Kirk stepped into sick bay, he was amused to see the young ensign sweating every moment he had to keep the Klingon's knife. He handed it to the commander with a sigh of relief.

McCoy sputtered in outrage, both at the guards Kirk had unobtrusively placed in sick bay and at his dangerous risk of the ensign.

"Do you have poker in this universe, Dr. McCoy?"

McCoy blinked. "Yes."

Kirk turned the knife over and flipped it into his belt. "This is our ace in the hole."

The two ships, still drifting inward, were fitted together, the intricate connections and struts done more rapidly this second time. The controls for both ships were fed into Sulu's helm, and the alien Klingon system was altered to fit it.

Kirk watched silently as Sulu and the Klingon helmsman synchronized both vessels, an immense task involving tens of thousands of relays. "Are we ready, Mr. Sulu? Mr. Scott?"

"All set here, Commander," Scott answered from engineering. "And my laddies have been over every inch of this. There aren't any Klingon devices hidden here this time."

"You won't find any."

"How could you be sairtan there would be no bombs, sair?" Chekov dared to ask.

"The first tenet in war is to know your enemy. I know where to press a Klingon so that it hurts. How long before we hit the anomaly, Mr. Spock?"

"Eighteen minutes, 55 seconds."

"Tell me when we have ten minutes to go."

Spock blinked, seeing no point in that, but obeyed. The joined ships swept in at full power toward the anomaly. Their only hope of escape from the gravity well



generated by the anomaly was to use that power itself, in a slingshot effect, to hurl them beyond its pull. The moment of opposite thrust had to be timed perfectly, to give them maximum escape velocity.

"Ten minutes, Commander."

Kirk pressed a button on his chair. "Computer, this is a Class I Captain's Directive--lock all ship's controls to my voice only."

"Affirmative."

Sulu cried out and Spock stepped swiftly to Kirk, who met him with a tiger's smile. "You can't phaser me now, or all the controls will be useless, and you yourself taught me how to repel mind control."

Spock attempted to break through his directive and failed. With time, he could possibly divert controls, but they had none. "Why?"

"Both ships are mine, Spock, and I'm going to destroy that thing."

The Klingon captain appeared on the screen the instant he saw they were still heading toward the anomaly, full power. Kirk instantly set off the planted bomb. "That one is harmless, the second is not. At the first motion to release your ship, I will set it off. Your engines will remain intact even then and that is all I require." He cut off Keless's "You're mad, Kirk--!"

"Mr. Scott." Kirk pressed the com. "You have about eight minutes to rig all our weaponry into one massive release. You will also set off the Klingons' weapons at the same time. They won't be coordinated, but they should help."

"But...that's impossible--!"

"Eight minutes." He cut off.

"Spock, can't you do--" Sulu cut off as he saw the phaser resting in Kirk's hand.

"You failed to destroy it before," Spock said.

"This time I'm hitting it right at its edge, at the interphase. If events parallel, it will roughly correspond to when my *Enterprise* struck it before. If it doesn't work, we may be carried past its field, in the recoil."

"And if we are not?"

"Then we'll find out what's in that thing. Brace yourselves; this will be rough."

"You may be committing both ships to suicide," Spock said, without emotion.

"Then I'll die a warrior's death. Even you cannot stop this ship now." In a few minutes, he pressed the com. "Mr. Scott?"

"I'm tryin'!"

"Whether you are ready or not, in three minutes I'm firing all weapons."

The Federation/Klingon vessel hurtled inward.

As the anomaly blazed across the forward screen, Kirk pressed the stud on Sulu's panel that fired everything on both ships into its interphase. The *Enterprise* recoiled from the massive release and rocked, losing control in the gravity storms. "Free controls!" Kirk cried out to the computer and Sulu fought to bring the ships upright. Their joined weapons detonated.

The light exploded into his eyes and brain as the energy doorway went nova. Kirk passed out and kept on falling. The mirror-ship plunged into the anomaly--and it dissipated around them...

His vision swam green as he woke and hands were on his arms. "Commander?" Then cool fingertips were laid against his skull and he knew who touched and asked quietly, "Jim?"

He opened his eyes to see Spock, bearded, and M'riss bending over him. Furry fingers touched his face and chest as was bloodright. "Welcome home, my brother..." She smiled.

Kirk grinned weakly and let them raise him to his feet. Then he winced.

"Pain, Commander?" Spock asked, low.

"No." He had suddenly remembered the Klingon's stolen honor-blade, now hidden in that Kirk's quarters. "But I think a friend may be in for more trouble than I bargained for." He wondered fleetingly how that other Kirk would react when he found a Klingon ship, its captain rabid, attached to his, upon his own return.

Achilles Heel

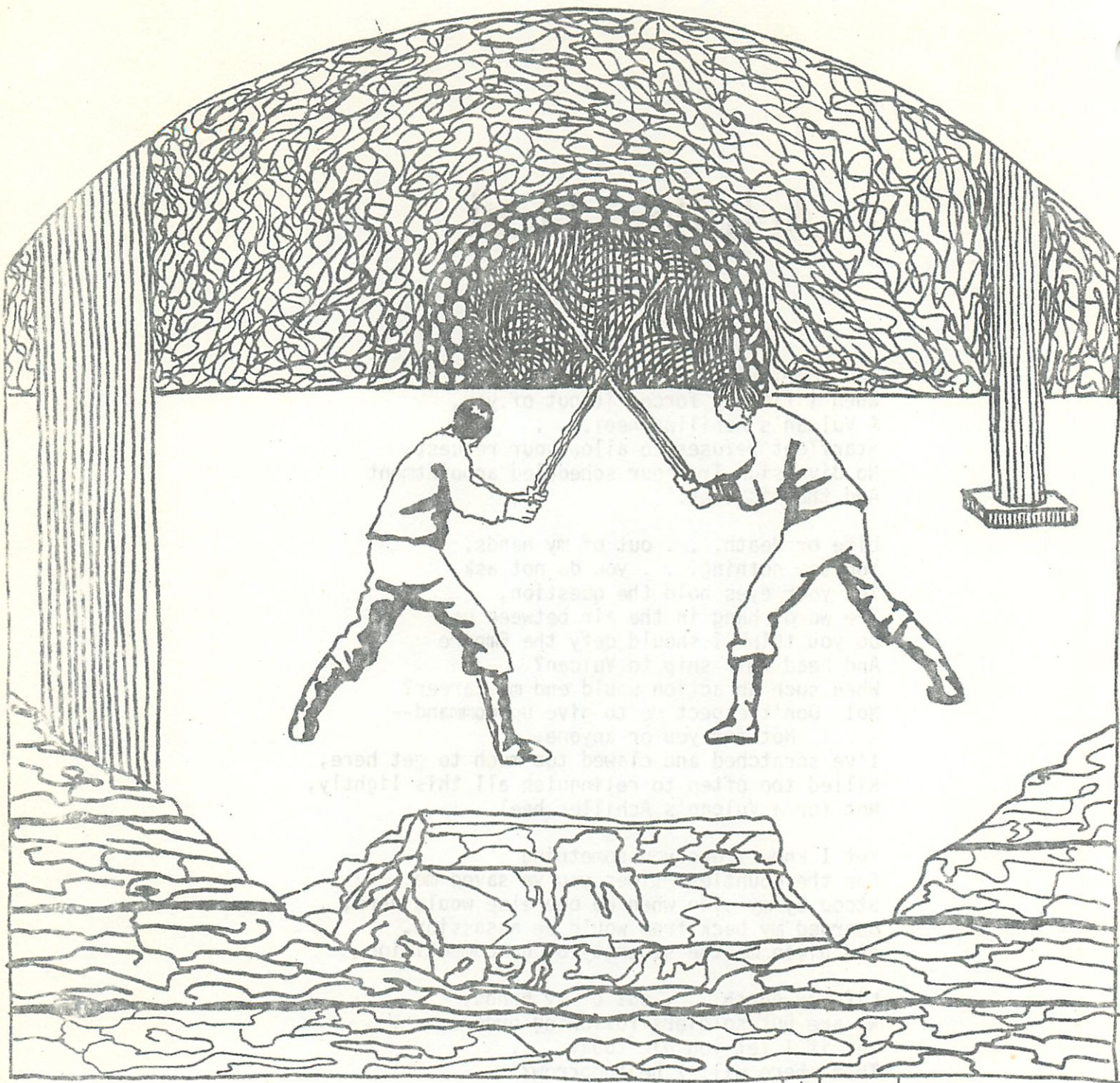
Pon farr, you called it,
When I finally forced it out of you,
A Vulcan's Achilles heel. . .
Starfleet refuses to allow your request,
No diversion from our scheduled appointment
And that is that.

Life or death. . . out of my hands.
You say nothing. . . you do not ask,
Yet your eyes hold the question,
The words hang in the air between us.
Do you think I should defy the Empire
And head this ship to Vulcan?
When such an action would end my career?
No! Don't expect me to give up command--
Not for you or anyone.
I've scratched and clawed too much to get here,
Killed too often to relinquish all this lightly,
Not for a Vulcan's Achilles heel.

Yet I know I owe you something
For the countless times you've saved me.
Stood by my side when no one else would dare,
Guarded my back from would be assassins,
And given me the security of no competition.

Life or death. . . out of my hands.
We are but soldiers following orders. . .
Yet if I let you die today. . .
Then where will I be tomorrow?

Crystal Ann Taylor



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PATHS OF GLORY

Karen Osman

From the outside, the low, rambling building was unimpressive. Blank walls of mossy grey stone and age-blackened wood drew hardly a casual glance from the passersby hurrying along the rain-slicked cobblestones. Only a weathered wooden sign, half-hidden by climbing vines, identified the place as Ruwenjorin, oldest dojo of the Jedi order. Further north were the bright lights and bustle of Tavarsan's business district and the Imperial Palace, but here in the narrow, secret alleys of the Old Quarter time seemed frozen--as if the Empire had never been.

Passing through the heavy outer doors of Ruwenjorin, one came first to a central courtyard with a small fountain set in weathered flags. On one side was the refectory with its massive trestle tables, and on the other a dormitory where sleeping platforms stood in long rows, each with its mat tightly rolled at the head. A low arch separated this compound from the rear courtyard where five or six pairs of novice Jedi were exchanging sword-strokes under the watchful eye of a Jedi master.

His attention was focused on two students in the far corner. One was a stocky, sandy-haired young man of about twenty-five whose only distinguishing feature was the grim intensity of his attack, but the other would have stood out in any group. Already, at sixteen, he was tall and broad-shouldered, with an adolescent lankiness that promised even greater adult height. His fluid grace, dark, silky hair, and above all the cold perfection of his features, the result of generations of controlled breeding, stamped him unmistakably as an Heir of Sith.

Warily, the two circled. The sandy-haired man obviously had half his attention on the master as he displayed like a ground-fowl defending his territory. The Sith was more disciplined, outwardly calm

except for a faint frown of concentration as his practice lightsaber flowed smoothly from one figure to the next. He could tell that his opponent was trying just a bit too hard to look good, his eagerness making him slightly awkward and off-balance. The new student aimed a sweeping cut toward him. He parried and pressed the older man back several steps, then suddenly sidestepped backward and drew his practice saber down and across in a diagonal stroke: a perfect "kill". The Sith relaxed fractionally in guard waiting for his opponent to concede, but instead the other lunged forward and landed a numbing blow. The Sith nearly dropped his saber in surprise, then managed to deflect the next stroke with a desperate counter. "Yield!" he said in a low, furious voice. "That was a good kill; the match is mine."

The other fighter advanced on him again. "No!" The Sith could follow his thought: *Not here in front of Obi-wan. Not to you.*

Such rage swept over the Sith at this deadly insult that his opponent's face blurred. To deny his honor as a fellow Jedi, to declare him unworthy of the code of chivalry by refusing to yield in a practice bout, destroyed the whole meaning of the saber. All thought of technique vanished, and the Sith hit his opponent a full-force blow across the diaphragm. As the older man doubled over, the Sith raised his practice saber again and brought it down toward the other's head with real killing force.

"Darth, no!" The Jedi master blocked the descending stroke with his instructor's rod. Darth Vader felt the shock through his whole body, bringing him up short, and with an effort he composed himself sufficiently to glare down at his former opponent climbed shakily to his feet. *Peasant, he thought. How can a blasterman use the saber properly? He has*

no honor.

"I'm disappointed in you, Darth," said the Jedi master. *The finest of my students, the strongest with the Force, but there is so much fire in him. Can even I control him if he learns his full strength?* Kenobi cut off that thought hastily, but not before Darth caught it. "I thought you had learned by now that a Jedi does not strike in anger. The fighter who allows emotion to master him is defeated even in victory. You are not fit to master another until you have first mastered yourself."

Darth opened his mouth to respond, then abruptly shut it again. He bowed slightly and said, "I ask forgiveness, Master Kenobi--for my anger."

"But not for your attack, hmm? At least you offer no excuses." Kenobi turned to face the other man. "Jhen Skywalker, you are as much at fault." He looked tired, and both novices recognized his recurring disappointment in his inept favorite.

"Obi-wan--" Skywalker interrupted. At the Jedi's frown, he amended, "Master Kenobi, you know what he is!"

Darth could feel the resentment Skywalker was broadcasting like a palpable wave. The stocky young man moved toward Kenobi as if to form a united front with him to shut Darth out. Darth's eyes narrowed and he felt the familiar scorn: *Do you think you can take my place here, Skywalker? You served with him in the war--but I'm his future, the master-to-be he wants most of all. You can't beat me, little Skywalker; you haven't the training or the skill. You'll never be the Jedi I am.* His head lifted proudly as he met Skywalker's hostile stare.

Kenobi put a hand on Jhen's shoulder. "Jhen, I understand. But the war is over. You are a Jedi now, and Darth is your brother Jedi." Between them, at the periphery of Darth's perception, hung the thought: *You were the best of my young soldiers, and I love you like a son. You will always be more than just a student, my friend. But here in Ruwenjorin I must be impartial--if I can. And Darth is the better Jedi.*

Darth could tell that Skywalker's control of the Force was less trained than his own, and the other's fierce emotion was blocking his reception of Kenobi's thought. There was hurt as well as anger in his sullen reply. "He will never be my brother," muttered Jhen.

"That's enough!" said Kenobi, calling both students to order sharply. "The lightsaber is a weapon for Jedi, not spoiled children, and you must be clear of passion to use it properly. There is great danger in calling upon the Force with

negative emotion clouding your judgment. The dark side, the side of anger, fear, hatred, will eat you up if you allow it an opening. Before you use the saber again, go and consider whether either of you deserve it."

Skywalker bowed stiffly and walked away. Outwardly he showed no sign of rebellion. Darth moved to do the same but was stopped by the doorkeeper appearing at his elbow. He bowed to Kenobi, then said to Darth, "Brother, there's a page at the door with a message for you. He's wearing Imperial livery."

Darth looked at Kenobi, who nodded. "You may take it."

"My thanks, Master Kenobi. Brother." As Darth walked away, Kenobi's frustrated sigh followed him.

When Darth reached the door, the page waiting there went down on one knee and held out an envelope with the Imperial seal. "Your Grace, His Imperial Highness commands your presence this evening at a reception celebrating the anniversary of his accession. He will send a speeder for you at 1900 hours."

"You may tell His Imperial Highness that I will be--'honored' to obey." Even Master Kenobi could not refuse a direct Imperial command. Darth walked back toward his sleeping area with his face impassive, but his mind was racing. A human page with an envelope, not a mechanical or an electronic message! And the page had addressed him as "Your Grace"--not the formal royal title, but one sometimes used to the Sith Prince or his close relatives. And he was being invited to an official diplomatic function after his presence here had been ignored for so long. Perhaps all was not well between the Emperor and Darth's cousin who had stolen his throne and sent him into exile here. Perhaps Palpatine was even considering supporting a counter-coup. But he must be careful. It would not do to underestimate the tortuous thought processes of the Emperor.

When the meal-bell freed him from his required period of meditation, Darth dressed for the reception. Discarding the loose white tunic and pants of a student Jedi for a civilian doublet of dark velvet, he put on a long, open black robe, high boots, and sweeping black cape: the garb of a Sith Prince. These barbarians, these non-Sith, might not recognize their significance, but the Sith Worlds would know by them that he did not intend to accept his cousin's usurpation. If the Emperor received him in this garb, it might be a bargaining point. He settled a thin filet on his hair and turned toward the door to see Kenobi standing there. When he saw Darth's clothes, he frowned, and Darth was pleased to see his concern even as he

dismissed it as unnecessary.

"The Emperor has commanded my presence this evening, Master Kenobi," said Darth.

"Yes, I received your message, Darth. And the Emperor must be obeyed, of course," said Kenobi sourly. In another tone, he added, "Darth, take care. I'm afraid you're getting in over your head. Palpatine is no fool."

"Indeed not." Giving him a look of such bland innocence that Kenobi could find no way to continue, Darth stepped past him and went out.

As he waited to be announced at the Imperial Palace, Darth glanced around the ballroom. His first impression was of glitter and confusion. The light from huge chandeliers splintered into myriad reflections from jewels and satins and mirror-polished floor, so that the whole room flashed like a faceted gemstone. Darth remembered his father's audience chamber with its muted velvets, its sheen of dark wood and dull-burnished gold worn to a patina by generations of seryants' hands. His mouth quirked in a faint sneer as he mentally evaluated the court's gaudy brilliance.

"You may enter now, Sir," said the gleaming protocol droid at his elbow. Turning, the machine bellowed, "His Grace, Prince Darth, Lord Vader, of the Sith Worlds."

Across the room three heads turned toward Darth. He recognized the two men from a hundred videocasts. The massive figure with a face like rock: that was Palpatine; and next to him was Count Anjord, the foreign minister, a thin, stooping man with the look of a dyspeptic heron. The third--at sight of her, Darth's breath caught slightly. With the two men was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. "Who is the lady with His Imperial Highness?" Darth asked the droid.

"Lady Elys Castoigne, Sir."

The Emperor's current mistress, if rumor was correct, Darth recalled. Well, even with an empire's women to choose from, I can understand why the Emperor picked this one.

As he walked toward them, Palpatine spoke briefly to Lady Elys, who curtsied and moved off into the crowd. Darth stopped before the throne and bowed with just the right degree of deference. It was neither the bow of subject to sovereign, nor of liegeman to lord. Palpatine's eyes narrowed slightly, but he greeted the prince cordially.

"Welcome to Our court, Your Grace. We regret that We have not had the opportunity to make your acquaintance before, but We did not know you were here in the capital. You should have informed Us."

I'll bet you didn't know, Darth thought. "I was not aware that my activities were of any interest to Your Imperial Highness."

"The activities of Our cousins of the House of Sith are always of interest to Us. But now that We have met you, We hope you will not remain a stranger. Please consider Our court as your home and attend Us often."

"Your Imperial Highness is most kind."

Palpatine nodded dismissal. Darth bowed again and backed out of the Presence. As he turned, he found himself facing Anjord, who smiled and offered him a glass of wine. Darth sipped cautiously, and was pleased to find it was his favorite vintage.

Coincidence or planning? he wondered. With the ingrained habit of the Jedi-trained, he reached out to touch Anjord's mind--and met a total blank wall, the natural shield of a mindmute. There was not even the unfocused chatter of a normal untrained mind. *Of course, Darth realized, such a mind is necessary for a professional diplomat.*

"Tell me, Your Grace," the foreign minister began, "are you enjoying your stay in Tavorsan?"

"It's a most interesting city."

"I've never visited the Sith Worlds myself," Anjord continued, "but I've heard that they're very beautiful."

Beautiful! Darth felt a surge of longing for his lost estates, remembering the golden lowlands and the high, cold mountains where the sky against the peaks was cobalt even at midday and the sun on the snowcaps was like molten silver. He could almost smell the remembered scent of wildflowers and sweet grass crushed under his riding delwa's feet and hear the ecstatic carolling notes of a luthra bird as it rose up and up in wide circles in the crystal air. "I doubt that you would like it, Your Excellency. It's a rather primitive system."

"And will you be returning there when your studies are completed? Or do you prefer the decadent fleshpots of the capital?"

Anger rose in him, and Darth thrust it firmly down. Anjord knew that the only way he could return to the Sith Worlds was by renouncing his claim to the throne and swearing fealty to his cousin. Koric was



enough of a fool that he would probably allow Darth to live, too, until he could raise a force of loyal men. But that would require that he forswear himself to crawl to Koric. Even for the throne, the price was too high. "No, I have no plans to return to the Sith Worlds--at least not in the near future."

"Ah, that's too bad." Anjord's tone of satisfaction belied his words. "The Empire could use a positive voice at the Sith Court." At the words "positive voice" the foreign minister raised a questioning eyebrow, but Darth ignored it.

"I have heard that you are not in complete agreement with my cousin's policies."

"Let's just say that we would prefer a more cooperative attitude in regard to the concessions the Empire has requested on Thanlor."

Darth answered, "It is my understanding that my cousin believes the extra-territoriality and the Imperial enclaves you asked for would compromise our sovereignty excessively. It seems a plausible position."

Anjord leaned forward. "Would it be your policy in his place?"

"I would hardly want to give any definite answer to such a hypothetical question." Darth smiled faintly. "If the situation materialized, perhaps I would have to reconsider."

"I see. Well, perhaps the opportunity will arise." Then, offhandedly, "Of course, the Empire does not interfere in the internal affairs of independent star systems. We could hardly have much influence on the situation."

"Of course not."

Anjord bared his teeth in a bright smile and nodded to the Sith ambassador who had drifted casually into earshot during this exchange, apparently absorbed in conversation with a young military attache in the uniform of the Alderaani Defense Force.

The ambassador smiled back with equal insincerity, and nodded coldly to Darth, who stared through him with an expression of amiable inattention. Since the two seemed to have no intention of moving, Anjord took Darth's elbow and steered him toward the buffet. "More wine, Your Grace?"

"Certainly. An excellent vintage."

Anjord accepted two more glasses from the servant behind the buffet and handed one to Darth. "I presume, Your Grace, that this discussion will remain

academic until you have completed your study at Ruwenjorin. Will you have much longer there?"

"That will depend. The study of the Force can take an entire lifetime."

"A fine occupation, a fine occupation! The Jedi have served the state well for generations. However--"

"However?" Darth echoed.

"There have been some unfortunate rumors lately that some of the current Jedi have had--um--'contacts' with questionable political elements."

"Indeed? How strange. I haven't heard any such rumors."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. That sort of people wouldn't be likely to appeal to an Heir of Sith." Anjord sighed. "That's our problem; most of the order are perfectly loyal, and it's so hard to weed out the unreliaables. You know how difficult it is to be selective with such limited information. Your father had much the same problem during the Granduthord revolt, I believe?"

Darth turned a haughty look on the foreign minister. Was this little flunky trying to threaten him? He had been eight years old when the planet of Granduthord had revolted against Sith rule. His father, a tidy man with a belief in effective solutions, had depopulated the entire world. It had been repopulated with the poor and landless from the other Sith worlds, and his people had blessed the Prince's open-handedness. But radicals throughout the galaxy had vowed death to the Prince and all the Heirs of Sith.

"I'm sure you agree, Your Grace," Anjord continued. "that you have no stake in protecting any disloyal members of the order."

Darth answered icily, "I assure you, Your Excellency, that I know of no members of my order who would hold the Empire in any less regard than I. If you will excuse me--"

He strode toward the door, but his path was blocked by a rustle of grey-blue silk and a wave of heady perfume. He looked down into the blue eyes of Lady Elys. She was no less attractive at this distance than she had been from across the room. Soft blond curls lay enticingly against the smooth curve of creamy bare shoulders, and as she breathed he could see the swell of her full breasts above the rich gown which flowed like a caressing hand over her perfect body.

"Your Grace, surely you're not leaving already? I had so hoped to meet you!" She turned her beautiful face up and

gave him a ravishing smile.

Em, thought Darth, Palpatine must want that information on the Order rather badly. First the threat and now--it seemed--a bribe?

"I must say, Your Grace, that you are not at all what I had expected," Lady Elys continued.

"How so, my lady?"

"Why, when I was told that you were only sixteen, I expected a child. Clearly, I was mistaken, for you are most assuredly a...man." She lowered her eyes and gave her lashes an experimental flutter.

Darth was amused. He had played this game before at the Sith court. With a hint of laughter in his voice, he answered, "I, too, was surprised when I met you, my lady."

"Indeed?"

"I have heard much praise of your beauty, but I see now that rumor did you far less than justice, for indeed, no words of man could express the perfection of your loveliness. The reality outshines the report as the sun outshines the pale morning star."

Lady Elys threw back her head and laughed. "Touche," she said, and allowed her genuine intelligence to show through the vacuous mask she had put on to dazzle an inexperienced boy from a backwater system. "Well, now that we've exchanged the necessary courtesies, why don't you and I go and take a look at the gardens? The rain has stopped, and they're really at their best this time of year. You must see the maze--it's famous all over the galaxy."

"Why is it famous?"

"It's all grown up with miles and miles of flowering bushes arching over into tunnels. It's like walking through the heart of a blooming tree. And right at the center is a beautiful little summer-house, but it takes quite a bit of woodsmanship to find it." She grinned. "People have been known to disappear in there for hours."

"Ah, I see," said Darth. "But perhaps the Emperor would prefer that we remain in attendance?"

"The Emperor has asked me to extend you his fullest hospitality. I know he won't mind if his guests amuse themselves by visiting the gardens. In fact, I'm sure he would be offended if you refused what the court has to offer."

"I certainly wouldn't want to offend His Imperial Highness." Darth bowed and took her arm. "Lead on, Lady Elys."

"With pleasure, Your Grace."

Darth returned to Ruwenjorin the next morning in a groundcar with a discreet Imperial crest on the door. By the time he had changed into his Jedi tunic and reported for breakfast, the entire dojo was buzzing. He slipped into his regular seat with eyes lowered and hands folded as required by custom, only to realize that the hands on the rough table across from him belonged to the new student he had fought yesterday. Darth cursed silently to himself.

"Where have you been?" asked Skywalker. "To sell us all out to Palpatine?" Heads around the table turned in their direction.

"Our quarrel is settled, brother," answered Darth.

"Our quarrel will never be settled as long as you live. We fought a war to free the people of the galaxy. As long as one planet suffers as the Sith suffers, we haven't won." Behind the rhetoric, Darth could feel Skywalker's hatred for the mere boy who had bested him in front of Kenobi.

Taking a firm grip on his temper, Darth answered formally, "I offer you no offense."

"You are the Heir of Sith. That offends me." The words were meaningless, an excuse.

Voices were raised in protest from around the table. "Come on, Skywalker, get off it. What's he ever done to you?"

"Leave him alone, he's got as much right to be here as you," said a big redheaded youth who added, "He's been here for a long time, working hard, and he's never caused any trouble. If you weren't Kenobi's pet, you'd still be on that damn dustball you come from."

Skywalker whirled to face the boy. He obviously did not want to be reminded that Kenobi had insisted that the dojo accept him as a student, although he was twice the age of the average first-year novice. "Don't you see? His whole family are bloody tyrants, just like Palpatine. Now Palpatine sends for him. He's gone all night, and comes back in the morning in an official car. What do you think they were discussing? The price of used droid parts? He's a spy!"

Darth rose slowly. "You farmer's spawn, I have no need to justify my actions, or the actions of my family, to you. We have been good lords to the Sith since before your ancestors climbed up off all fours, and if my people have any grievance, it is for them to bring it before me, not

for you to meddle in the affairs of your betters."

"Yes," Skywalker spat. "You're great at being gracious and benevolent to 'your people' as long as they're humble and obedient and drool all over your boots kissing your feet. But you can't accept anybody as an equal. You want everybody to be like those poor clones in the Imperial Guard: bred and brainwashed so they can't even think of protesting. The Sith aren't 'your' people--they don't belong to you!"

"They belong to me, as I to them." How could this creature understand the bond between a lord and his loyal liegefolk? This nameless man, without title, without family, without honor....

Skywalker turned to the others again. "You hear that, fellow 'peasants'? If you think you can trust--" He stopped abruptly as the monitor came toward the table. Under his silent displeasure, the two student Jedi sank back into their seats and returned to outward composure. But Darth could sense Skywalker's feelings from the fringe of the aura which reached him. Beneath the belligerence, Skywalker was uncertain. He felt out of place in this group of near-children who moved so confidently amid rituals and forces he only half understood. In spite of himself, Darth felt a grudging pity for the older man. *To have so much potential power in the Force, and to be so blind to it: never to feel the glory and power of joining totally with it--the power; oh, the power....* His hands clenched involuntarily on the table, and he came back to himself with a start.

Darth's aristocratic manner had brought him only a few close friends at Ruwenjorin, and, as Skywalker repeated his accusations again and again, suspicious looks and whispers began to follow him. Little knots of students would fall silent as Darth approached, greet him with a few polite monosyllables, and wait for him to leave before resuming conversation.

Much worse, Skywalker refused to confine his agitation to Ruwenjorin. Several times, Darth found him haranguing passersby in public areas near the school with violent attacks on Palpatine and the Empire. Even though the Old Quarter was not a center of patriotic enthusiasm, Darth knew it was only a matter of time before a police spy turned up in the crowd and connected Skywalker with the dojo.

Darth went to Master Kenobi, but he said, "It's what he believes in, Darth. He has to follow his conscience, make his own decisions, and endure the consequences, just as you must. Even if it's dangerous, I can't forbid him to speak. While he is here in Ruwenjorin, he is the student and I am

the master. Outside these walls, he must rule himself."

In the days that followed, Darth found himself waking up suddenly in a cold sweat from surrealistic dreams in which Master Kenobi was slowly demolished with sadistic thoroughness by the Imperial interrogators. He had seen what happened during the search for ringleaders of the Granduthord revolt, and the images were permanently impressed on his mind. He knew that once the Empire began looking for members of an organized conspiracy, it wouldn't stop until it found them--guilty or not. It wasn't malice, simply the mindless grinding of the bureaucratic process.

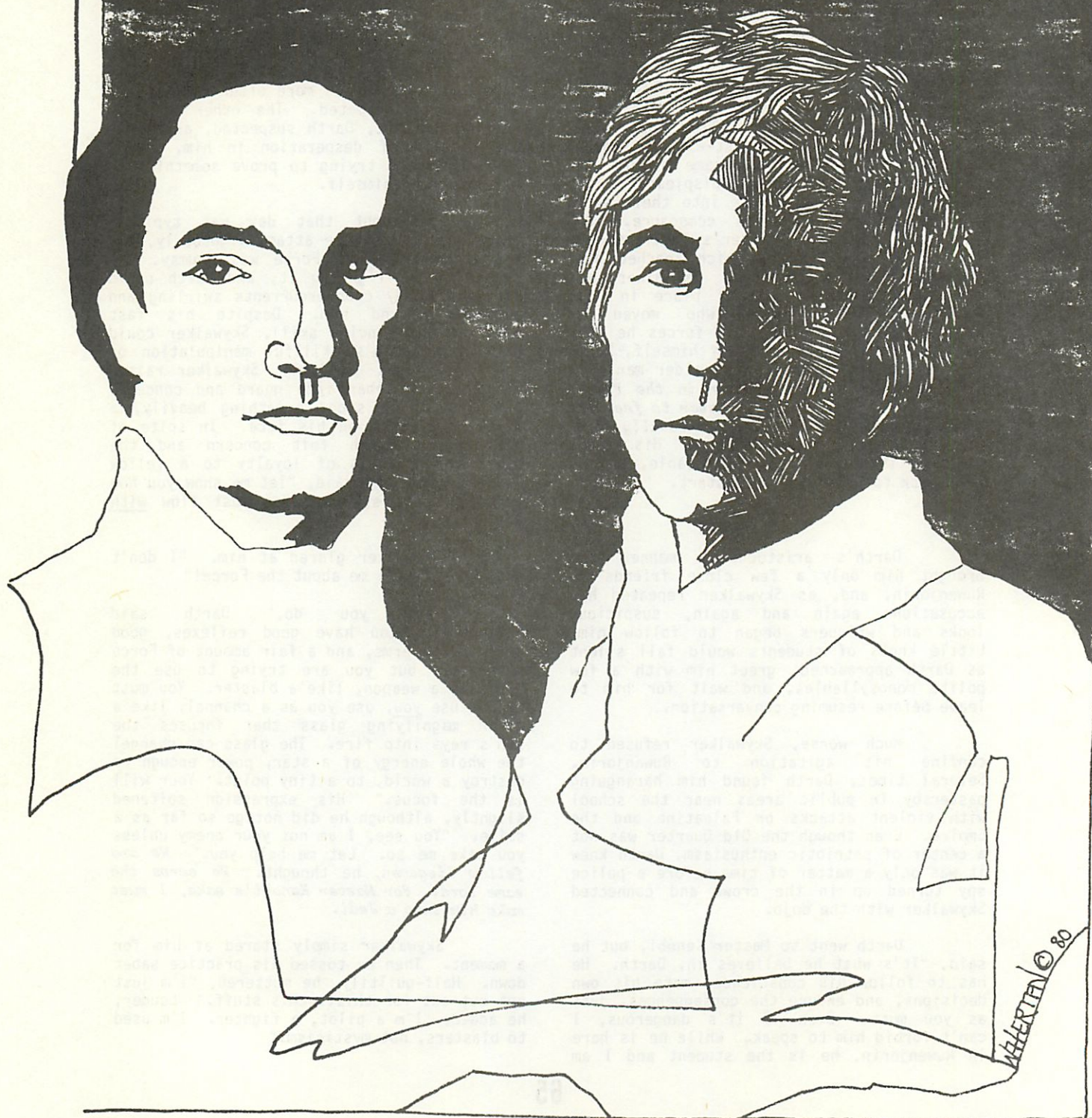
Darth now found himself paired with Skywalker at practice more often than chance would have indicated. The other man was seeking him out, Darth suspected, and there was an air of desperation in him, as if Skywalker were trying to prove something to the master or himself.

The bout that day was typical. Skywalker pressed the attack vigorously, but his control of the Force was clumsy. He seemed to be fighting it, and Darth could feel the muddy countercurrents swirling and clashing around him. Despite his fast reflexes and fencing skill, Skywalker could not match Darth's skillful manipulation of the Force flow. Sullenly, Skywalker raised his practice saber into guard and conceded the match. He stood breathing heavily, a discouraged look on his face. In spite of his anger, Darth felt concern and the unwilling prodding of loyalty to a fellow Jedi. "Here," he said, "let me show you how to block that stroke. You must flow with the Force...."

Skywalker glared at him. "I don't need you to tell me about the Force!"

"But you do," Darth said patiently. "You have good reflexes, good training in arms, and a fair amount of Force potential, but you are trying to use the Force as a weapon, like a blaster. You must let it use you, use you as a channel, like a clear magnifying glass that focuses the sun's rays into fire. The glass can channel the whole energy of a star, power enough to destroy a world, to a tiny point. Your will is the focus." His expression softened slightly, although he did not go so far as a smile. "You see, I am not your enemy unless you make me so. Let me help you." *We are fellow liegemen, he thought. We serve the same Lord. For Master Kenobi's sake, I must make him into a Jedi.*

Skywalker simply stared at him for a moment. Then he tossed his practice saber down. Half-guiltily, he muttered, "I'm just not cut out for this...this stuff." Louder, he added, "I'm a pilot, a fighter. I'm used to blasters, not mysticism."



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Darth wondered, not for the first time, how Skywalker could have lived in a Jedi dojo for as long as he had and remain oblivious to the fact that he was broadcasting his every thought to each Force-sensitive within range. *It's what Obi-wan wants, Skywalker was thinking. God knows I--we--owe him enough to give him that much. But I'll never be the Jedi he wants me to be, and this wet-behind-the-ears kid shows me up in front of him every time. I'm too old to start over in first grade here. I want to be out in the streets, with ordinary people, doing things I understand. The revolution--they need me there.*

"Thank you," said Skywalker, though he nearly choked on the words. "But I'd rather ask Master Kenobi. He's my trainer, and he's responsible for me."

He's responsible for me--

That night Darth dreamed again about Master Kenobi. Guards marched him down a dank stone corridor into an underground chamber that Darth's subconscious furnished with clichés of dripping, cyclopean walls, gloomy shadows, and antique torture implements that his waking mind would have rejected as hopelessly anachronistic. Kenobi was locked into a restraint while one of the black interrogation remotes hovered nearby humming softly to itself. A drop of liquid gathered on the end of the needle it extruded like an eager predator's fang. "This one is strong and well-disciplined," said an interrogator with the face of Palpatine as he advanced on Kenobi and began twisting his fingers off, one by one, and throwing them casually to the floor. He moved upward to unscrew the wrist, saying, "It will take a lot to break him--" Kenobi's face contorted in agony, and--

Darth sat up on his sleeping mat with a yell which he managed at the last minute to reduce to a strangled gurgle. He felt cold and shaken, and he could tell that there would be no more sleep for him that night. He looked to each side. The sleepers on neighboring mats remained undisturbed. Cautiously, so as not to wake them, Darth crept out of bed and dressed in the dark. He padded softly to the courtyard, drew on his boots, and walked to the main door. The doorkeeper was dozing in his chair, and Darth slipped past him unnoticed into the street.

At first he simply walked, glad of the exercise which unkinked his tight shoulders and unknotted the fear in his belly. The image of Kenobi's pain returned, and he pushed it away desperately. Gradually he found his long strides taking him northward toward the fashionable part of the city. The sight of a pedestrian was unusual here. A robocab drew over to the

curb and inquired, "May I serve you, Sir?" At the toneless droid voice, Darth looked up to see the machine hovering on its anti-gravs, door politely open on his side.

Darth hesitated. *A Prince of the Sith is not a police spy. There is no honor in defeating an enemy in secret by the hand of others,* said a part of his mind. Another part responded, *That madman Skywalker must be stopped or he'll destroy the entire Order.* A third thought nibbled at the back of his mind, one he had been deliberately ignoring for the last five days: *Anjond as good as promised Imperial support for regaining rule of the Sith if I provide them with a disloyal Jedi.*

He was swept by such passionate desire for a moment that his head swam. He clenched his teeth. He would not allow that to influence him! Turning Skywalker over to Anjond was the only possible answer; the safety of the whole Jedi Order depended on it. And Kenobi's life.

"May I serve you, Sir?" The flat mechanical voice of the robocab repeated. Darth slipped into the passenger's seat and deposited a credit. The door swung shut, the tape clicked, and the 'cab asked, "Destination, please?"

"Ministry of Security," Darth said.

Anjond was most cordial in spite of the late hour. His clothing looked thrown together and his face had the puffy, unfinished look of someone waked abruptly from sleep, but he smiled broadly as Darth entered his office, followed by three secret police officials and the Chief of Security.

"Excellent, excellent!" the minister chortled, "I'm so glad to see you again, Your Grace. Now, I'm sure you won't mind if we engage in a few formalities here before we begin?" He nodded to the security chief, who flipped a switch on the desk. "Recording, sir," he said.

"Identify," said the computer link.

"Your Grace, if you please--" said Anjond. Darth gave his name and the computer agreed that he was who he claimed to be by a cross-check of his voice-print. He then gave a complete account of Skywalker's anti-government activities.

"Thank you, Your Grace. That should be sufficient," said Anjond when Darth had finished, and the security chief flipped off the recording switch. The foreign minister continued with satisfaction, "Yes, a little editing, and I think we'll have enough to take care of the whole Jedi Order."

"What!" Darth cried.

"Oh, we've had our eye on Skywalker for some time, ever since he left Tatooine, in fact. But we needed a non-government witness from the inside before we could be sure of convincing the Senate and the Emperor that a genuine conspiracy existed in the Order. Reactionary romantics, all of them are, still seeing the Jedi as shining heroes defending peace and justice. They might have been that once, but the time is past for a group of undisciplined knights-errant with high-powered weaponry wandering around the galaxy cutting down whomever they take a dislike to." Noting Darth's stricken face, Anjord added, "Don't worry, Your Grace. There is no question of any charges against you."

In a dangerously quiet tone, Darth said, "You assured me that you were only interested in 'weeding out the unrelia- bles'. There was nothing said about an attack on the Jedi Order."

"I'm afraid you misunderstood me. As I recall, I only said that it was difficult to weed them out. Now it shouldn't be necessary. We have all we need."

"Anjord!"

Anjord looked surprised. He took on a pompous, lecturing tone. "But surely, Your Grace, it must be obvious to you that the state is responsible for the safety of its citizens. The Empire can hardly allow a highly trained, well-armed, and potentially disloyal paramilitary organization to take justice into its own hands and carry out private vendettas against anyone it decides is undesirable. Justice has to be based on law, not personal whim." He paused, then added so softly that even Darth could hardly hear him, "Not even the Emperor's."

Darth tensed. He was never sure afterward whether he intended to bolt for the door or attack Anjord, but he was prevented from having to make a decision. Before he could move, two of the secret police had taken him politely but firmly by the elbows, and the third was covering him with a blaster.

"We're going to have to ask you to avail yourself of our hospitality once again, Your Grace," the foreign minister said. "Only temporarily, of course. It's for your own protection--until we have the remaining Jedi in custody." Darth considered using the Force, but he realized there were too many guards in the building for him to control. Yet. He did not yet have the control.

Darth shook the guards off angrily, but declined to argue with the blaster. He sank slowly into the desk chair. Anjord bowed and exited as the guards settled down for a long wait.

It took Darth until the afternoon of the next day to bully his way into the area where the Jedi were being held prisoner. The footsteps of Darth and his two guards echoed down a windowless, grey corridor lit by dull indirect light, a claustrophobic metal tunnel like a deep-space docking umbilical. Security doors irised open as Darth inserted his visitor's pass at each checkpoint, then slammed together with a clang behind him like a series of robot jaws snapping at his heels.

The final door took a check of his guards as well as his pass before opening on a dismal room. It had walls of a muddy grey-green and a dark floor so scuffed and battered that it was impossible to tell what its original color had been. A few cheap plastic chairs gave the place the air of a provincial orbital shuttle terminal. Inside were Master Kenobi, Skywalker, and four or five other students and instructors from Ruwenjorin. They stared hostilely at him.

Darth's voice emerged as a whisper. "Where are the others?"

"Dead," said Kenobi. "I doubt if any of them escaped."

"And you killed them!" shouted Skywalker. "You're responsible for their deaths." His voice was frantic, his eyes glazed with rage and hatred.

Neither of them answered him. Their conversation continued without the slowness and ambiguity of spoken words.

//Why, Darth? Show me why you betrayed us to the Imperials.//

//I was afraid. I meant to save you from just what has happened. Anjord promised--// Darth sketched what had passed between himself and the foreign minister.

Kenobi took a step toward Darth. "Darth, child..." he began aloud, and there was distant pity overlaying the sorrow in his voice.

Darth stiffened.

//Darth, you are a child,// Kenobi continued. *//All my lost children--//* Darth caught from the edges of his mind. *//Or you would never have taken Anjord at face value. "The honor of princes is the snow of midsummer."//*

A wave of confused emotion--anger, shame, anguish--swept over Darth. "Not the honor of Sith!" he cried aloud, and moved toward Kenobi to express with wordless body language the apology his royal pride prevented him from voicing openly. *I failed my master, he thought. I betrayed my lord. Not willingly--oh, never that... What worse dishonor can there be?*

During their exchange, Skywalker stood looking on from one to the other, a puzzled expression on his face like a man straining to follow a conversation of which he could catch only an occasional word. As Darth took a step toward the Jedi master, Skywalker shouted "no!" and ran toward him.

Darth could not tell from the boiling confusion of Skywalker's mind whether he thought the Sith was attacking Kenobi, or whether he was trying to prevent a reconciliation between them. Perhaps Skywalker himself was not sure. He launched himself at Darth, arms outstretched, preceded by a formless wave of hatred in the Force, aimed like a weapon, anger that could kill. Caught off-balance, Darth instinctively lashed out with the Force to defend himself. The next minute Skywalker crumpled as Kenobi leaped forward to catch him and lower him gently to the floor.

For a long moment the Jedi master remained bent over Skywalker's dead body, and the room was full of his grief. Kenobi's sorrowing thoughts reached Darth. *He was my man. He offered his death for me in battle. His whole life was in the Alliance; I took him away from it, took him from his wife and son, brought him here to teach him the Jedi way he never really wanted to learn. Now he is dead. We needed him so much. My fault; my fault...* A cold bitterness slowly brought the Jedi's thoughts under control. *My fault--and his, the Sith's...*

Slowly Kenobi straightened up and turned to face Darth. His face was controlled and utterly remote. He was suddenly a figure of awesome power, his tone formal. "It is as I feared, Darth. The dark side of the Force has claimed you, the side of passion, not reason. You have killed your brother. You are no longer worthy to be a Jedi." He half-turned toward the other prisoners and raised his voice. "I cast you out of the Order. I utterly renounce you. Henceforth your name is forgotten. Is it agreed, my brothers?"

"So say we all," they answered.

"My brothers," continued Kenobi, "these two were of my household and both were my students and my friends. The injury is mine; I claim the redress."

"It is your right," said the oldest of the instructors in the room, and the others assented. Kenobi turned to Darth and said in a ringing voice, "I claim your death!"

A cold hollow settled in Darth's stomach. It was the formula for a formal lightsaber challenge, a ritual so ancient that it dated to the earliest beginnings of the Order when the Jedi had been little more than a loose guild of wandering warriors and duels between Jedi had been common. Honor

now demanded that one or the other of them should die by the lightsaber, and there was no possibility of refusing.

Numbly, his mind unnaturally clear, Darth realized that neither of them was armed. He had relinquished his saber to the guards at Anjord's office and Kenobi, as a prisoner, was weaponless, although what had happened to his saber in the capture, Darth had no idea. The challenge must lie between them until they met again, if they ever did.

Darth forced words past the constriction in his throat, and was surprised to find they sounded level and calm. "I await you when we are both armed, Obi-wan." The other would be "Master Kenobi" to him no longer.

With a nod to the guards, Darth turned on his heel and strode out of the detention cell. He never remembered clearly the walk back to the main desk or his exit from the Ministry of Security. Everyone--guards, secret police, the speeder pilot who delivered him to a hotel--seemed to move past him in a blur. Only when the door closed on his room did his thoughts clear. He noticed that his visitor's pass to the detention center was missing, but he couldn't remember turning it in. The problem seemed curiously meaningless, and after a minute he dismissed it from his mind.

Darth spent an uneasy night on the unaccustomed softness of the hotel bed, and awoke still tired. A quick glance out the window showed him a pair of ostentatiously inconspicuous men lounging against the wall opposite his room on the other side of the street. He was still being watched, and the guards obviously intended him to know it.

He pushed the question of what to do next down to give his subconscious a chance to chew on it, and let his conscious mind float as he moved through the graceful figures of Jedi fighting *katas*. A dead calmness flowed into him with the familiar discipline of movement and breathing. Whatever Obi-wan might say, he was no less a Jedi than before he told himself. Now the only master he had to satisfy was himself. There was no one else.

At that thought, he was suddenly filled with desolation. His concentration faltered and he stood still, breathing hard in what threatened to become a totally undisciplined, humiliating sob. The remembered image came to him of his father's funeral, of himself standing by the looming catafalque draped in the ritual mourning-cloth. The confused emotions he had felt then returned to him: *Death is the final failure, he had thought; my father is mortal, is fallible, too. I'm free of him. He can't judge me any more against a perfection no human being can achieve. He*

failed, too. An ugly, angry joy smoldered in him for a moment, followed by guilt as he quickly suppressed the thought. And fear--I must not think that; it's wrong. I owe a son's duty, obedience; a liegeman's duty, fealty. Treason is the worst crime. It will be punished... But who is there who can punish me, the Lord of Sith? Now. The fear returned. No one. There is no one else. I'm all alone...alone... "Father..." he muttered, "Obi-wan...Father..."

He breathed in, a shuddering gasp, and disgust filled him. What nonsense was that! He was a Vader, a Jedi, Heir of Sith. Who did he need? No one. With the power of the Force, nothing in the universe could stand against him. He didn't need anyone to teach him--he could learn it himself. He would be a more powerful Jedi than any the order had ever seen. There was nothing to hold him back now--not Obi-wan, not fear of the Dark Side, not the petty incompetence of his fellow students. There was no one to judge him now. *I can take anything I want; I'm free*, he thought, and a savage exultation swept over him. He moved through a complex kata with flawless grace, finished with a smashing killing blow and stood laughing in the middle of the room. *Free!*

He had just finished dressing and was giving thought to breakfast when there was a knock on the door. He was not pleased to open it on the page who had summoned him to the Emperor before. This time several secret police hovered in the background. "His Imperial Highness commands your presence, Lord Vader," the page said. Darth's mental ears perked up at the change of title.

Darth was ushered into a small audience chamber to see the Emperor alone except for his ever-present bodyguard and a secretary droid. Palpatine was jovial, and it did not take his visitor long to discover the cause of his good humor.

"Well, well, Lord Vader, it was good of you to come. Your visits to my court do seem to bring me luck! First, I want to thank you for your help in discovering disaffection among the Jedi. We've had a small problem--a minor escape--but we will soon have them all back, and Anjond has the situation well in hand."

So that's what happened to my visitor's pass, thought Darth.

"The foreign minister has asked me to commend you on your public spirit," the Emperor continued. "You've rendered a real service to the Empire, and you will not find us ungrateful to our friends."

Darth bowed warily and waited for him to go on.

"Since our last conversation, your cousin seems to have developed a more cooperative attitude. He has agreed to the concessions we requested."

"All of them?" Darth blurted, startled.

"All of them," said Palpatine firmly. "And he has accepted the peace-keeping force we offered to garrison there. Under the circumstances, I don't imagine that you will want to return to the Sith Worlds in the near future? No? I thought not. So, in light of your loyal service to me, I have decided to give you a special commission in the Imperial Navy, under my direct command. Your computer profile shows remarkably high aptitudes in all the required areas."

"The Heirs of Sith have been bred to command, Your Imperial Highness," said Darth. "We're genetically selected for it." The cold rage he felt showed itself only in the slightest possible emphasis on the word "we".

"Of course! Excellent!" said Palpatine. "We wouldn't want to waste such potential, would we? Report to Naval Headquarters today for assignment. My secretary here will advise you of the details. You may go."

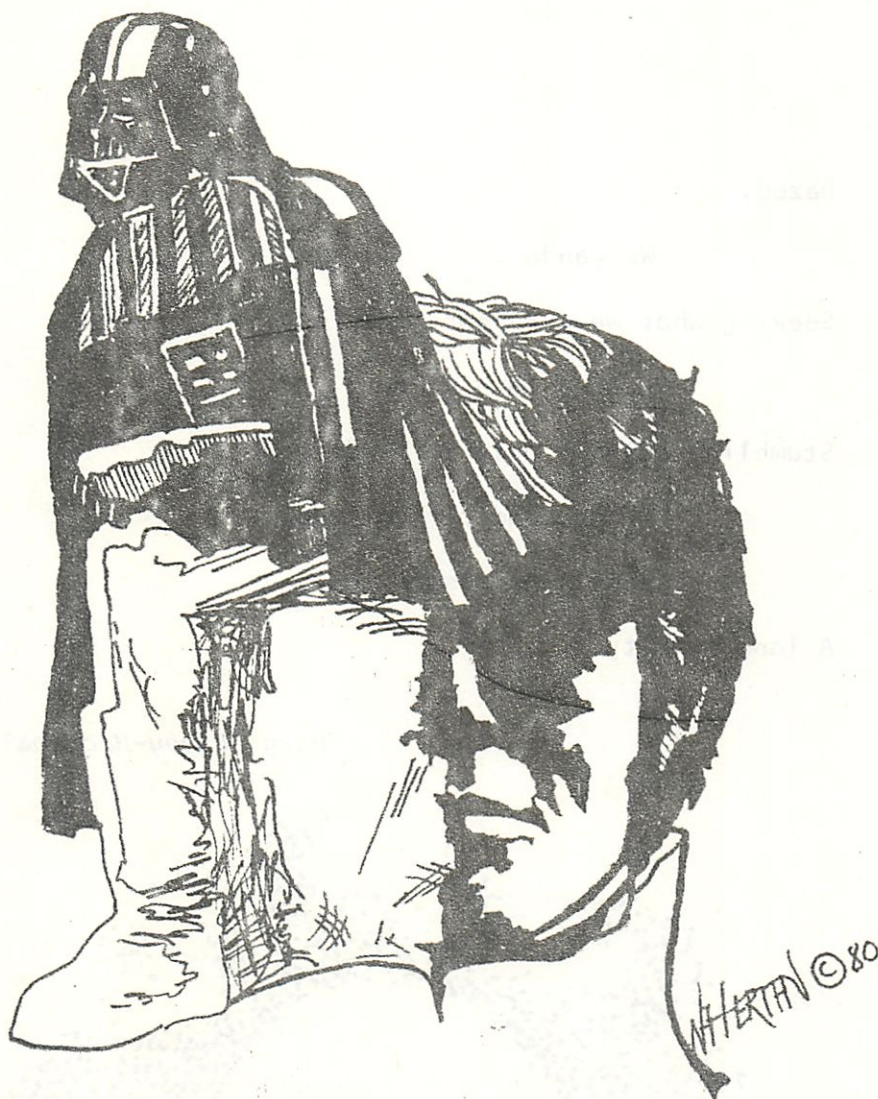
"As Your Imperial Highness commands," said Darth, bowing with just enough exaggeration that a suspicious observer might have considered it ironic.

As he backed out of the Presence, Darth thought, *So the whole thing was merely a method of putting pressure on Koric--and eliminating the troublesome Jedi in one neat gambit. I was just a pawn. Now Anjond thinks he can buy me off with just enough to preserve the amenities. What better way to keep someone under polite surveillance and control than by meshing him into the military machine?* There was hardly a move he could make without being noticed. It was almost as visible as the Imperial throne.

Darth realized that he had turned a corner in his life. What he felt was no longer clean, hot anger. It had become something darker: a cold, bitter disgust and implacable contempt. He had been made a fool of once. His pride would not allow it to happen again. Never again would he believe in anyone or anything except himself. "Bred to command" he had told Palpatine. Well, he would prove it. For all his nonsense, Skywalker had been right about one thing: Imperial stormtroopers, clones, such as he would command, were the only beings one could trust, for their loyalty was bred in their genes and their obedience to their commander was absolute.

The right man, with patience and cunning,
could do almost anything with them. Darth

lengthened his step, and in the grim set of
his face there was already a hint of metal.



Ad Infinitum

Dazed,

We wander,

Seeking what we dare not hope for:

Echoes in a mirror.

Stumbling blindly only to find

A thousand reflections,

A million distortions,

A lone reality. . .

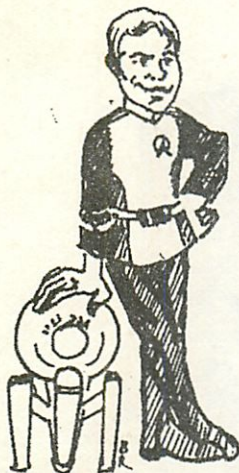
Mary Stacey-Macdonald



STARFLEET'S FINEST...

Starfleet's got its hustlers, and Starfleet's got its brats.
And Star-fleet's got its desk-chair jockeys, one of whom is goin' bats;
He may be old and he may be flabby, but he stands out like a one-man class,
And if you took a poll of ninety Federation yeomen, they'd say he's
Starfleet's finest-- uh, admiral.

You don't steal your engineer's mate,
You don't piss into the wind,
You don't send a boy to man a Federation warship,
And you don't mess around with Jim.



From Academy ranks there came a pretty boy, ambition shone in his blue eyes,
He was a chip off the block of his commodore papa, an' he stood 'bout
twice Jim's size,
He was lookin' for a starship captaincy, but when Kirk heard, he stopped
in his tracks,
Sayin', "I may be gettin' lazy, and I may be goin' crazy, but I mean to
get the Big E back--
"Just because

"You don't steal your engineer's mate,
"You don't piss into the wind,
"You don't send a boy to man a Federation warship,
"And you don't mess around with Jim."

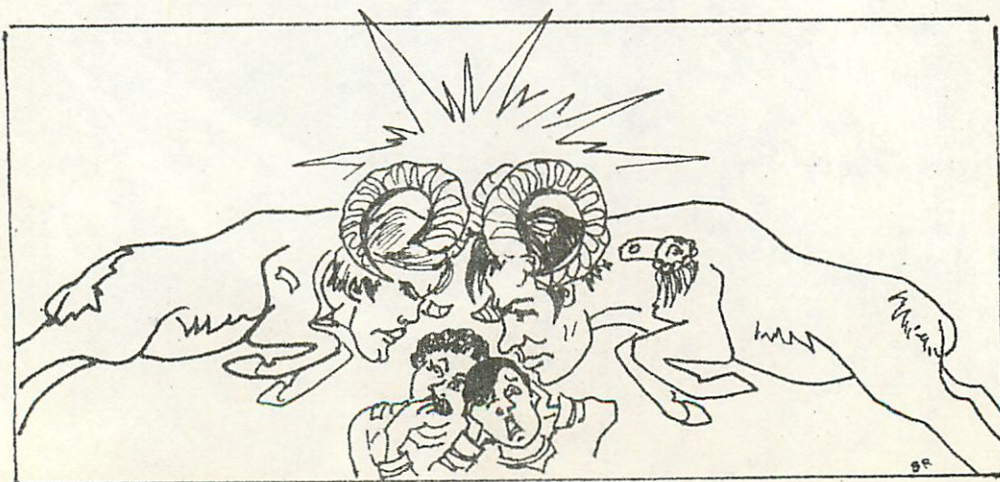
When the two of them faced off together, and the Admiral took the kid to task,
When the dust settled down and the noise level dropped, McCoy still had
one thing to ask:

"If you're both done buttin' heads now, pick yourselves up off the floor--
"And please, if you can, won't the both of you remember what this ship
is out here for?!"

"You don't steal your engineer's mate,
"You don't call a Vulcan effete,
"You don't send a scoutship after interstellar meanies,
"And you don't mess around with the Fleet."

(Yeah, that kid got the sack:
Found out where it's at is not hustlin' people strange to you,
Even if you do have devastating blue eyes and stand six-foot-two. . .)

You don't steal your engineer's mate,
You don't piss into the wind,
You don't send a boy to man a Federation starship,
And you don't mess around with Jim.



CRUEL LOOKING GLASS

BARBARA WENK

"Captain Kirk, I shall consider it." Commander Spock activated the transporter controls, and the changelings from that other universe shimmered and vanished. "Fool," Commander Spock added dispassionately.

He turned off the transporter console and turned to Marlena, standing wide-eyed beside him. She darted a look at the now-quiet controls, and then back at Spock.

"But--the captain? And the others? Aren't you going to bring them back?"

"Why?" Spock regarded Marlena with cold and speculative eyes. Instant comprehension sprang to Marlena's face.

Ah, not stupid. Spock's hand shot out and fastened like a trap on Marlena's fragile wrist. *No, not stupid.* His iron grip had effectively halted her instant attempt to move past him to the door.

"No, Marlena." His voice was almost gentle.


She made no vain efforts to break his hold. "Please, Spock--!"

Spock's eyes still studied her terrified face. She was beautiful, and not at all stupid. And, more importantly, she undoubtedly knew many of the late captain's secrets. "I have not yet decided," he said. "You may be of more value to me alive."

Marlena's expression of fear did not fade. She cast a desperate look at the now-empty transporter chamber. "But I almost thought--what about what he said? You agreed that the Empire was illogical! You said it couldn't last! And about the future--"

The smallest of smiles touched the Vulcan's firm mouth. "No government ever lasts." He slowly tightened the muscles of his arm, drawing Marlena closer, his hand reaching for her face. No matter what happened, he could never permit her to retain memories of the occurrences of the past few hours.

Only I will ever know. Spock's fingers spread along the curve of Marlena's cheek and brow. She drew a sobbing breath, closing her eyes.

"And the only future I am interested in summoning, Marlena--is my own." 

The Unofficial Sequel to "Cat Dancing": "Crossing the Fantasy Barrier"

or

#NEW YORK CITY STRAY

by Susan Matthews

Warning: Portions of the Following Manuscript are Rather Baroque (the Rest is Merely Silly)

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

(1) Some of the ideas set forth in this story are drawn from the ThousandWorlds theory of the nature and function of spice, and are used as borrowed from the ThousandWorlds universe by permission of Maggie Nowakowska and Dyane Kirkland. Reference to "Heildie kits" is also by permission.

(2) The character and nature of the Althea pantherix temple-dancer Thera are original with Martynn (Maryann Walther). Martynn, and Martynn alone, retains full control over the destiny of Thera, and has the ultimate say as to what Thera may and may not get herself involved in.

DISCLAIMERS:

(1) As threatened, this story does indeed include the pantherix temple-dancer from Althea and the dangerous Dholgourouki torturer from the *Ragnarok* together, on the same page even. I protest, however, that, knowing and respecting the feelings and reactions of the Admirable Artist from the Wilds of Pittsburgh West of Revod, it was never and will never be the writer's intent to force any but whatever mutually agreeable congress there may be (or, more probably, may not be) between the two above-mentioned individuals.

(2) I Trust that the Relative Lack of the Corellian Presence in this story will be at least Partially Forgiven me in light of the Alternate Masculine Decoration I have Devised for this Tail.

(3) It may be Noted by the woman most concerned in this matter that in this Tail Thera, the aforementioned Althea pantherix temple-dancer, displays rather More of the characteristics of "the strong, feisty, take-charge female" than the "shy, languid, somewhat enigmatic type" that her Mistress and Creatrix specified to Your Very Obedient Servant in her letter of 16 July 1979. I can Only Feel that this is One of the Inevitable Results of Congress with Corellians.

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Thera sat huddled on the floor in the corner of the makeshift cell with her knees drawn up, her back to the wall, and bit her lip, trembling, trying to still her weeping by main force of will. It had happened too quickly, too suddenly, for comprehension; she couldn't really think straight, she was too dazed with the shock of it, confused by her pain. Why they'd picked her up in the first place she didn't understand--

She put her head down on her knees, breathed deeply, tried to put her thoughts in order. It had only been--what? three standard months since her last adventure had ended, she had thought safely. She'd been feeling safe, she'd been feeling as if she could afford to relax, and there had been no warning--home from a long day, carrying her groceries, the storm troopers in her front room, the cruel and efficient hands that struck her, subdued her, captured her... they'd carried her out of her own little set of rooms and she'd been vaguely aware of the small frightened crowd gathering before she had lost consciousness.

And when she had wakened she had found herself here, in this place, prisoner not of storm troopers after all, but of a breed as dreaded--bounty hunters.

She'd fetched herself some fairly telling blows in her abortive struggle against her captors, and her head had been rather fuzzy ever since. She wondered from time to time whether they were drugging her food. She understood, in a hopeless sort of way, why she was a prisoner. She imagined that there had probably been a price on her head since the day in Rammergau when the oversight of the param, Dispen, and her half-willing attraction to the Corellian Han Solo had involved her all innocently in espionage and rebellion. It made good sense for bounty hunters to disguise themselves as Imperials, too--any friends, any defenders she might have had, would not dare attack Imperial storm troopers where they might have interfered with bounty hunters.

She wasn't alone in the cell, she had a partner in captivity; but his presence only made things the more confusing. Her captors had been in Imperial dress; so was the blond humanoid-- Thera supposed he might have been from one of the Dholgourouki lineages, though which one she didn't care to guess at--and he wore the dark tunic of a ranking Star Fleet officer. Why such a man should be prisoner of bounty hunters she could not begin to speculate, unless perhaps he was a deserter, or a renegade of some sort.

Whatever his status, his situation was as dire as hers; he seemed somewhat battered, even as Thera herself, and like herself he apparently lacked the energy to more than lay quietly and turn over when he was kicked.

Kicked they both were, and frequently. Thera did not sense any revengeful motivation, any sadistic pleasure, in her jailors, but beatings they got nonetheless. As one might kick a piece of paper aside, casually; as one might strike an object, with no feelings. Thera decided that that was an entirely suitable attitude for a bounty hunter.

She could almost have wished for a more traditional group of torturers--the arbitrary nature of their mistreatment of her was almost more distressing than her bruises, her aches and pains, were in and of themselves.

She was fed and watered, and they did not let her lack for spice--for which she was grateful, since the atmosphere of her prison would have been barely supportable to her without maintenance doses of that same spice that permitted most beings to adapt to various atmospheres, various nourishments, and survive.

But at the same it seemed her uncommunicative fellow prisoner was not so lucky. Thera had first been apprised of his presence by the labored sound of his breathing, though she hadn't guessed at the reason for it at that time. It had not been until he began to suffer from the tell-tale periodic convulsions of respiratory distress that Thera had recognized his symptoms as caused by spice deprivation. Evidently the atmosphere in their cell was close enough to his native gasmix for him to breathe; but not close enough for him to breathe quite comfortably.

Thera had spoken to her captors--bravely, for she'd been slapped more than once for speaking--on the other's behalf; but as soon as she did, she wished she hadn't. The three or four of them that had come into the room on the heels of their feeder had laughed evilly at her words and made jokes between themselves about it. She didn't like their comments, she didn't like their teasing and their taunting of their prisoner; and she knew she had nothing to say about it.

"Needs his spice, does he, lady? You bet he does. But not near as much as he's going to need it--right, brothers?" And they laughed. On the whole Thera thought she might have preferred being slapped.

"Don't worry about him, kitty, worry about yourself. You're the one who's going back to a nice cozy Imperial detention cell, with all those friendly painmasters to keep you company. Him, he gets it nice and peaceful and quiet--it should take him only, oh, six or eight standard hours to smother in Spicebean's atmosphere. Not nearly enough of what he needs to support a Dholgourouki's respiration in Spicebean."

The other prisoner spoke up then, his voice rough with his difficulty of breathing. "You're not Imperial, then..." The phrase drowned in a fit of coughing, dreadful for Thera to hear. The poor man. Slow asphyxiation, horrible.

"Hadn't you guessed? No...contract on you'll pay more to leave you on Spicebean than sell you back to the Emperor. And you won't be coming back this time, either. Won't be too much longer now, Koscuisko. Any last requests?"

The question was clearly a mocking one, but to Thera's surprise--and also, evidently, to the surprise of their captors--the man did answer.

"Leave the lady with me. To comfort a dying man..."

"And kiss twelve thousand credits good-bye? No chance--"

When they had gone Thera's cellmate spoke yet again, a third time, a last time. To Thera. "It would have been easier for you," he said; but could not continue. Thera was unsure of his precise meaning--surely she would die the same terrible death? But yes, if she were sold to the Imperials, their Inquisitors could make her death both more lingering and more terrible.

"Thank you," she said, timidly. And all was quiet until their captors came and dragged him away, leaving her alone now with her misery to fret about her future.

Thera drowsed, and awakened only slowly, aware of the voices first only as part of her desperate dreaming. She had to strain to distinguish the words, and the bulkhead between her cell and the corridor distorted what was said almost beyond comprehension. And the phrases themselves, the conversation didn't make much sense to her until she was awake.

"--can't sell her to the broker, now. They'd find out."

"Why should she tell them about it?"

"Aw, brother, now you know better than that. When Imperial painmasters go to work, you can bet they'll hear anything and everything a client can come up with that might work to make it stop. She'd get around to telling sooner or later."

Thera was still, trying to pretend she was yet asleep. They were talking about her, she knew that now.

"So what we gonna do? That's twelve leaves, right there."

"You want the money, or you want to

stay alive? No contest, brother. You know what'd happen to us if his crew knew what we've done with him?"

"We can't just ditch her with himself--"

"But we can lose her in this Fruit City, the Apple, whatever it is they call it. 'New York.'" The speaker mouthed a foreign phrase uncouth to Thera's ear. "'New York.' We can forget the temple-dancer in Fruit City as easily as we forgot His Excellency in Settleport. Who's to know?"

The voices receded down the corridor, out of range for hearing, leaving Thera in a turmoil of speculation. They'd taken her fellow-prisoner and abandoned him in some foreign--and presumably backward--culture, that much seemed clear. Her captors had referred to this worldfamily as "Spicebean"; but if spice was as common on this planet as implied by the name, and they could still leave her fellow-prisoner to die there, surely the beings inhabiting "Spicebean" did not yet understand the true significance of spice--and by that token, this worldfamily of "Spicebean" had not yet expanded much past its own atmosphere.

Thera shuddered at the thought. She had heard of such primitive cultures, of course; but she had never wanted to prove the existence of such for herself...

Some unknown time later--not too long--her captors came in to the room for Thera.

"You want to know what's happened to your little friend there?" one asked, indicating the corner where her co-captive had been secured. "You'll be able to find out for yourself. Just put this little headcover on, that's a good little queen--"

They put a hood over Thera's head, and drew it snug about her throat; she had no trouble breathing, it was not that snug, but she couldn't see. And then they lifted her, and walked her out, through the ship's corridors for many turnings, finally down a ramp-- Thera could perceive the change in the air on her skin, if not in her breathing. They had left the ship.

Almost immediate to that, however, came her caging--she protested, and she cried out, but they bundled her into a raised box of some sort, and close the lid of it. It was a fairly roomy box, longer and deeper than it was high; she felt certain muted shocks of impact, she heard the voices she recognized as those of the bounty hunters as if at a distance, she heard a sound of some sort of machinery being activated--and the box began to move.

2

7/1
7/1960



Thera deduced from the sounds and the vibration that she was in some sort of a wheeled vehicle, and apparently surrounded by machinery of the same sort. She suppressed her fear in speculation: where were they going, what were they going to do to her?

After what seemed to be a substantial passage of time the vehicle stopped moving. Thera heard, felt, sounds similar to those that had preceded the start of this journey; she wondered if it might have been the opening and closing of exterior doors.

The lid to the box came off, she felt the influx of cool air against her skin; they dragged her out of the box and let her rest against it as her cramped limbs struggled to adjust to standing. They were out in the open; Thera could hear planet-noises, wind through vegetation, and also sounds of machinery. A garden? A park?

"We've got to get back," someone said, and then spoke to Thera. "Here you are, kitten. Fruit City. Don't worry about trying to find your little Dholgourouki friend there, he's clear across the continent. Save yourself--if you can. One thing for sure, you won't need to worry about spice--it grows on trees, on Spicebean--"

Someone cut her hands free, and the voices with their incomprehensible mockeries receded slightly; she thought she heard the vehicle doors again. Then a loud sound of machinery startled her, deafened her, and the box she rested against began to vibrate. She put her newly-unbound hands tentatively to the fastenings of the hood; just then the box fell away from her suddenly. She sat down, hard, on the ground, and heard the sound of the vehicle receding into the more distant and more general background of machinery.

Cautiously, Thera worked at the hood, carefully freeing herself. For a minute she thought perhaps something had gone wrong with her vision; then she realized that no, the world was dark. Perhaps it was night, or perhaps it was a darkworld... Thera considered her surroundings.

It was clear enough that the surface she sat on--stood on, as she raised herself to her feet--was some sort of an edging to the vehicular track. The vehicles themselves--she saw one or two as they passed by--looked like old-fashioned speeders to her, and yes, with wheels. The edging she stood on was raised several inches from the vehicular track--a foot-traffic passage. And there was, in fact, certain vegetation behind her; some resembled stationary Arborea of respectable size, even giant, while for the most part the lawns and other vegetation--Thera felt comfortable in deciding it was a park or a

public garden of some sort.

She heard voices speaking an unknown tongue close by, and stepped back from the pavement several measures to hide in the nightshadows. What was she going to do? She had to have some time to think, to decide. What if she couldn't communicate--how was she going to survive? The night was not cold, but still she shivered. The clothes she had been wearing when they'd captured her had suited only much warmer worlds than this dark cool park.

She needed warmer clothing, food, something for her feet, she needed spice... Slowly she began to move across the damp lawns toward a lit walkway. She would find a peacekeeper, that was what she would do. There was sure to be some public charity to shelter her until she figured out...

Thera hadn't gotten any further than the idea of a public charity when the ruffians attacked her. She couldn't tell how many, but there were too many, humanoids, with knives, laughing at her--snatching at her clothing, striking her-- Thera screamed in terror, screamed for help, but there seemed to be no one to help her, and the ruffians just laughed...

* * *

He knew better than to walk through the park at night.

After all, there was only one of him, and--he had been told, to his immense disgust--he really didn't look dangerous at all. At first sighting, at least, which was all that would matter to the gangs of young punks who liked to hunt mundanes in the streets and in the parks at night.

He didn't particularly enjoy fist-fights, under most circumstances, and he failed to see the attraction in proving oneself over and over again at the expense of punks; he knew his own capability, and the scorecards some of his fellow agents liked to keep for such things held no interest for him. His self-image did not require he go out and put himself in danger of being beaten up for no good reason. It was his considered opinion that he was beaten up, and shot up, and otherwise interfered with, often enough in the regular course of his highly irregular business. In his time off he would just as soon listen to jazz.

He had been listening to jazz, in fact; a particularly fine session, flute and jazz piano, at Philharmonic Hall. He felt good, so good that he had elected to walk across the width of the park all the way from West Sixty-fifth and Central Park West down to East Fifty-ninth and Grand Army Plaza in the small hours of the morning, and

let the fine and intricate mathematical functions of that music reverberate soothingly in his mind instead of taking a cab directly home. He was fairly close to his destination now, just passing the pond; and he felt fairly safe, he had been living here for twelve-thirteen years now, and he knew his streets.

When he heard the woman scream it changed the complexion of things a bit, and he went to investigate. The sound had been quite near, actually--cat-footed in his soft old shoes, dark-clothed in the dark night, he angled into the park and around to where he had heard the noises.

Yes, indeed. It was as he had suspected, a group--a gang of street punks--misusing a woman. True, she quite probably had no business being in the park at this hour; but that was no reason for these punks to abuse her. He didn't particularly care for punks, and this looked like the sort of situation that he actually enjoyed breaking up. Five of them, and one of him--well, the odds were a little unbalanced, but it was their own look-out if they hadn't brought reinforcements.

* * *

For several heartbeats she was aware of nothing else except the fact that she'd been rescued. The assault was over as quickly, as suddenly, as it had begun, and Thera--grateful for support while she caught her sobbing breath--clung to her protector mindlessly while she fought to put away her fear.

Whoever it was was holding her in a comforting fashion, murmuring low-voiced phrases that were soothing for all the alien nature of the language. In a short time she was able to breath more easily and felt somewhat more composed. A part of her--a small voice in the back of her mind--noted the fact that she could indeed breathe this air, but her reaction to it under stress told her that if she wished to breath it much longer she was going to need some spice. She put the thought into the background to face and examine her rescuer.

At first he looked oddly familiar in the dim light, and she peered closer, trying to pin the familiarity down. But the longer she looked at him the more certain she was that it had been a false resemblance; she could not think of anyone she knew who really resembled him. He was a little taller than she, though not by much, and his face looked curiously flat to her. She would have liked to check his ears, to see if they were like hers or not, but his light-colored hair covered all but the lower portions. His hair, in fact, made him look rather shaggy to Thera; but then, in her culture, males and females both were more

precise in their personal appearance than many other humanoid races.

He was still talking to her, his voice pitched in the middle of what Thera judged the upper ranges for men's voices generally. She could not think of the word for his voice, but it was comforting, though she could only guess at the content of his speech.

He apparently understood after a bit that she heard but did not understand whatever he was saying. He stepped away from her, gestured with his hand along the walkway in what seemed to be an invitation for her to follow him.

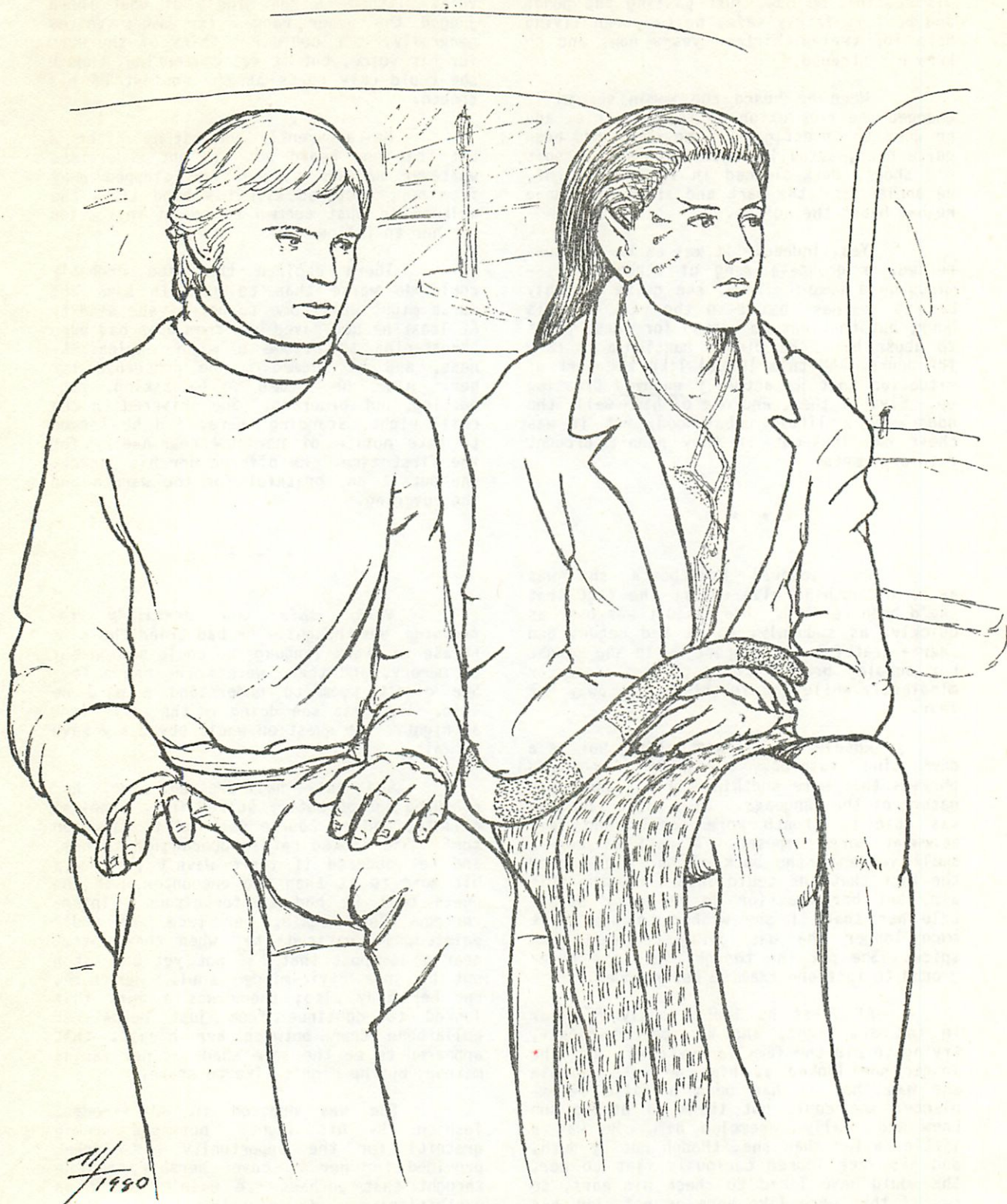
Thera decided that she probably could do worse than to go with him, and worse might well come to her if she didn't. At least he had saved her from what had been threatening to become a major unpleasantness, and he seemed to be concerned for her. Also, he seemed to be asking, suggesting, not ordering. She shivered in the chill night, standing there, and he seemed to take notice of her now near-nudity for the first time. He offered her his jacket; she put it on, grateful for the warmth and the covering.

* * *

Well, this was certainly *intriguing*, he thought. He had tried the same phrase in every language he could summon out of memory, and there were more than a few. She didn't seem to understand a word he said. What was she doing in the park alone at night? The question would obviously have to wait.

And only half-dressed, too; her clothing seemed better suited for a tropical climate, and of course much of it had been torn. She looked rather bedraggled to him, and he wondered if there wasn't perhaps a bit more to it than the encounter with the punks that he had so fortuitously interrupted. Then again, her face was oddly painted, he noticed that when they passed near a lamppost that had not yet been shot out by some civic-minded soul. Her face, and her body also; there was a mark that looked to continue from just below her collarbone down between her breasts that appeared to be the same shade as her facial makeup, but he didn't like to stare.

She was dressed in an immodest fashion, by his lights, but she seemed grateful for the opportunity his jacket provided for her to cover herself, and he thought that perhaps she wasn't simply an exhibitionist. He certainly didn't know what else she might be. He'd take her to New York Hospital, to the emergency room, and maybe they'd be able to find out for him. She was perhaps an alien, an illegal



immigrant; or else a ward of the state, run off somehow from the people she surely must have watching after her. If she were merely deaf she would have spoken to him, if she were deaf and mute--she could not have screamed.

He rehearsed this logic in his mind as they came out of the park onto East Sixtieth and he started watching for a taxicab. It was not too long a wait, considering the hour; and he was just helping the woman into the back seat of the taxi when he saw her tail.

He stared after her as she settled herself meekly into the back seat, thinking fast and furious. *Wait a minute. A tail?* It was a definite appendage, perhaps as long as her arm or longer, and it appeared to have a mind of its own--she had already folded her hands in her lap when the tail came curving around gracefully from behind her to lay across her hands. It could scarcely be a part of a costume--he got in after her, gave the cabbie the address. A costume complex enough to feature an independently mobile tail would never have survived the rough-housing he had interrupted.

He'd heard of people being born with tails, but the tail was nearly always purely vestigial in those cases, and he had never seen any report on a tail that actually functioned. The biologist that was part of his inner being was intrigued, fascinated. He reached a tentative hand out to her lap, hoping that she wouldn't take his gesture as hostile, or as an attempt to take liberties.

She looked at him--he couldn't tell if the green-gold light in her eyes was reflection from the street-lamps, or true cat's eyes--but made no move to retreat as he lay his hand cautiously upon her fifth appendage. He gazed in complete absorption at it, oblivious for the moment to anything but her tail. It was warm, as warm as one would expect a living member to be. And it was ever-so-softly furred, a fur as fine as chinchilla.

That was interesting, the rest of her didn't seem to be furred--he touched the side of his thumb lightly to the back of her hand, experimenting. Her hands weren't furred. Nor were her hands, her skin, softly banded in cat-tail rings of green and gold fur subtly exchanging colors--he took a bit of the fur between his fingers, trying to identify its texture. But he must have been a little clumsy, and pulled or pinched it, because the tip of her tail suddenly jerked in response--and he felt the muscles move beneath his hand. He lifted his hand immediately and smoothed her fur down gently with his palm in a conciliatory manner. It was a tail, a genuine tail. It was fascinating. It was also--he folded his hands in his own lap, looked out the window on his

side of the cab, embarrassed. It was also very arousing. Best he not think about it any more just now.

He noticed something odd about their route, and was just about to protest to the driver when he realized where the cab was taking them. Of course. He'd been so beguiled by his first glimpse of her tail that he'd given the cabbie his home address, not that of New York Hospital. It was just as well. He'd call Headquarters from his flat, and he and this cat-lady would go there instead. A woman with a functioning tail--oh, just wait till Danforth got a hold of this. The biologist had been insufferably smug ever since she'd come up with that new, improved flu virus that only affected blond males of Slavic extraction. Yes, indeed. This would definitely fix Danforth's wagon.

* * *

Thera was a little concerned about where they stopped; there was no telling, of course--the line of tall dull-mosaic wall broken by occasional windows and periodic doors could be either residences or offices, and she wasn't sure she liked either idea.

The man she was with passed some credit-chits to the driver of the conveyance, and motioned for her to get out; she stood on the pathway and watched him fumble about in a pocket in his trousers for a moment, then he went to the door and did something to open it. Thera didn't see any admit-panel, but he was again motioning her to go with him, and she stepped up the stairs slowly, thinking hard. Was it a detention center? A warehouse? Who was he, what did he intend to do with her?

Then she heard a cross voice from within speaking a very bad dialect of what was nevertheless unmistakably cattan. Thera didn't speak cattan very well, but she didn't speak whatever language it was the blond man spoke at all, and the ill-tempered and ungrammatical expostulation was a very grateful sound to her.

"Are you going to stand in the doorway all night?!" Thera heard. "What are you waiting for, large clumsy two-foot? A prey?"

The blond man--who now stood inside the building, still holding the door--tilted his head down and said something in the direction of the floor. Thera was up the last few steps in an instant, anxious to see who had spoken.

The man was talking to a very small cattan indeed--a four-footed cattan who was even now grooming its chin-fur against his leg and purring like a child. "Who are you?" Thera asked, in as good an approxima-

tion of the cattan dialect as she could manage.

The cattan stopped still, and Thera could see its well-furred tail stiffen with threat and fear. The cattan turned abruptly from the man, and stared up at Thera with its hackles bristling from behind the protection of his leg.

"How do you speak The Language, twofoot?"

Thera was somewhat at a loss as to how to answer. "I learned in school. He doesn't speak it, does he? Is it safe here?"

The little quadrupedal cattan coughed, in what Thera recognized as a retreat-from-threat. "No, but this cat-friend fishgiver comes close to understanding. He won't singe your whiskers. In school, you say?--I've got to tell the others: I'm off--" and the cattan bolted out of the door and into the night.

The man shut the outer door; Thera thought he looked a little confused. Then he started up the stairs inside the building; and Thera--heartened now by this chance meeting with a creature that she could talk with--followed him with as close to a cheerful heart as she'd had since this adventure had started.

She followed him into what was clearly a living-place--a somewhat untidy living-place, just at present. He went immediately to an instrument that was half-concealed among the sheets of printed material on the floor by a chair; a communication device, she surmised, as he began to speak into it. He seemed to be paying her no attention. Thera went exploring.

She had little difficulty in identifying the rooms in this apartment to her satisfaction. There was the common-room that her rescuer stood talking in; there was the bedroom, and the washroom off to one side. The tiled floor of the washroom was cool beneath her sore and naked feet.

She stood in the washroom for a moment, enjoying the sensation; she would have to see if she could make him understand that she needed slippers, clothing. She caught a glimpse of herself in the reflector above the washbasin and was startled at how unwell, how pale and dark-eyed and bruised she looked. Awful. He certainly couldn't have any designs on her, not when she was looking like this.

She checked the rest of the room--closestool and fresher, with what she was certain was a tub... well, it was a civilized culture then.

Out through the bedroom, into the kitchen; the man was still talking to the communication device. The bedroom was as

untidy as the common-room, and there were unwashed dishes in the kitchen; but Thera's fine native sense of smell told her that the man was clean in his personal habits, if not precisely neat. There was no hint of stale linen in the bedroom, no suggestion of dirty utensils left for too long in his kitchen. She was on her way out of the kitchen when she smelled something else.

What was it? Was it possible-- could it be--

Her senses filled with the fragrance of the spice until she was frantic with it. She needed spice, had to have it, she knew she wouldn't be able to eat or drink--or even breathe, for much longer--in this alien place, without spice. Where was it? She knew she smelled--

A clear pot of black liquid sat on the counter, half-filled. Spice-black liquid. It was spice, she knew it--she was too eager for the spice to look for a glass, a cup. The pot was cool to her touch; she lifted it to her lips and drank. Almost immediately she felt its effects: cheering her, comforting her almost as if it were waves of warm perfumed oil that washed down over her tired and sore limbs. Oooh, that felt good. The taste was a little bitter, admittedly, but it was spice--

He came into the kitchen, met her eyes over the rim of the pot. He said something, a question, and took the pot from her unwilling fingers, dumping the spiced water into the sink. She was horrified--such a waste of spice--but if he was as casual as that with it, it must be plentiful here, and she would be fine for a while now. She should have plenty of time to find some more.

He was still talking; he sounded encouraging, helpful. Thera perched herself up on a tall stool and folded the jacket he had given her modestly in her lap to watch what he was doing. Her tail secured what was left of her bodice across her breast, and she was covered, if barely.

He took a packet of something out of the upper portion of a coolstore, shook some of its contents into the palm of one hand. Thera stared at the black beans as he fed them into a machine, wondering. The bounty hunters, they'd called this planet Spicebean--were these the spicebeans they'd been referring to?

He touched a button, there was a noise, and the clear base of the machine suddenly started to fill with a growing pile of black or brown dust. And at the same time the most delicious fragrance filled the air, all at once. Spice! So strong, so fine a grade from its perfume, as Thera had never encountered before. She felt she was almost giddy from the smell of it alone. He transferred the dust into an oddly-shaped

pot, an eight-sided metal pot that looked as if it had been made by upending one octagonal cone atop another; set the pot on a heat-coil, went to the coolstore again, this time to the lower portion, for some white liquid, mixed a white crystalline powder together with the white liquid in a heavy ceramic glass, and suddenly seemed to notice that Thera was half-naked.

At least so Thera surmised, for he left the kitchen abruptly, and when he came back he was carrying a long blue cloth-wrap that he offered her with gestures that she should put it on. Thera took the cloth-wrap--it was light and silky in her hands, smelling both of recent laundering and of her host--and he turned his back to her. Thera thought that he was perhaps embarrassed to be looking at her when her clothes were torn. She thought that a very proper thing, too.

She stood and set the jacket down, and wrapped herself in the cloth-wrap. It covered her quite adequately, though from the way the shoulders, the sleeves were cut it was definitely the man's wrap, not a woman's. Now she did feel better, she felt decently dressed. He did not seem inclined to turn around, he was doing something with the pot, and the fragrance of warm strong spice made Thera feel almost giddy.

"Catfriend fishgiver?" she asked, to get his attention. He turned around and gave her a mug full of ambrosia.

He seemed to take pleasure in watching her drink; Thera lost herself in the wonderful experience of that cup of hot sweet spiced liquid. It was a different color from the black spiced liquid he'd dumped; it was a golden sort of a brown color, probably from the white liquid he'd added. It was perhaps the same white liquid that took the bitterness off the drink. Whatever it was, it was wonderful, and her widely-educated palate told her that this was high-quality spice indeed. She finished her cup, and was only a little ashamed of her greediness when she held the mug out for him to refill.

He seemed amused, in a benevolent sort of way. He took the mug from her and said something in a questioning tone. Thera had to assume that he was asking her if she wanted a refill, and could think of no more likely response than to repeat what she thought she had heard in an affirmative tone. It worked.

He smiled--Thera decided that she liked his smile, it seemed to be a little shy, but endearing--and went through the drill with the white crystalline powder and the white liquid again. This time Thera drank more slowly. She was beginning to feel like herself again. She was stiff and sore from many bruises and long-cramped muscles, and her feet--even hardened as they



were by her years of barefoot dancing--were somewhat torn and bleeding; but she'd found a like-language speaker in the little cattan, and the man seemed an amiable sort, and the warm spice-drink was heavenly.

She set the mug down and put her palm over the top to indicate that she had had sufficient spice for now. She decided to try an experiment. She looked him in the eye--he had clear, very blue, eyes--and pointed to herself. "Thera," she said. When he made no response, she tried again. "Thera."

"Thearrah?" He tried her name, but the sounds did not run together quite properly, and he made three syllables out of two. It was a start, anyway. Thera nodded vigorously. "Thera."

He seemed to test the name, tasting it, trying to grasp the unfamiliar sounds. "Thearrah." She laughed; his unintentional warping of her name tickled her ear. He looked sour for a moment, and Thera sobered immediately. Very well, then, he didn't like to be laughed at. Thera made a face of contrition; he pointed at himself then, and said what she assumed to be his name. "Illeeah."

"Illerah," she answered. Some of the sounds of the word were those that were beyond the best efforts of a pantherix, but

she did her best. He scowled at her in what she had little difficulty in interpreting as mock-outrage, and insisted. "Illeeah."

"Illerah," she retorted. If he was going to misuse her name she had every right to make free with his, after all. He laughed then; and they were interrupted by a shrill signal of some sort from the front room. He went to respond to it; there were more men at the door, and clearly he expected her to come with him and go with the group of them. There was a little apprehensive again, but her appreciation of adventure was enough to still the nervousness. They were hardly Imperials, after all, so how awful could this adventure be? She put her hand in the crook of Illerah's arm and went almost cheerfully.

* * *

It was three days since Illya had found the intriguing young woman in the park. He and Napoleon and Mr. Waverley all sat around in Mr. Waverley's office and listened to Dr. Danforth's report.

"All our test results confirm that she's intelligent, aware, interested in her surroundings. She appears to have the mind--the intelligence, as we understand it--of any educated, involved young woman. But that's as far as it goes. Her blood isn't iron-based at all, her respiration appears to depend on a combination of oxygen and other gasses significantly different from our atmosphere--though she seems able to adapt, to survive given sufficient quantities of caffeine, in steady doses."

Well, and she was not unlike Napoleon in that, Illya thought. The idea appealed to his arid sense of humor. The media all seemed to feel his profession was full of people who drank grain spirits like water; but he had found himself more than once totally disgusted by the almost miraculous rejuvenation Napoleon could obtain from a single cup of coffee. For himself, he was supposed to be resilient. But Napoleon was only a capitalist.

"She can select for caffeine as well as an adrenalectomized animal can select for chloride salts. She can metabolize carbon-based foodstuffs adequately for her body's needs; she seems to indicate that the caffeine allows this adjustment. Her body is a very efficient organism--but she isn't human by any biological standard."

Mr. Waverley was smoking his pipe, not saying anything. Illya was reluctant to interrupt.

"The difference is as fundamental as the genetic material. She hasn't got the normal set of chromosomes--and some of hers

are tri- and quadrosomal. Her heart has a fifth chamber, and her blood pressure is affected accordingly. And there is, of course, the question of her tail."

Illya glared at Napoleon, as if daring the urbane agent to make a comment of the obvious nature. Napoleon had apparently decided to behave himself, just this once--at any rate, he said nothing. The doctor, having sipped her diet soda, continued.

"As the presence of her tail might lead one to suspect, her skeletal structure is rather different from the human norm. There appears, for instance, to be a vestigial joint in each toe--the equivalent of the genetic memory of a claw. All in all, she is unique."

"Any leads on where she came from--how she got here?" Illya asked.

"From what we can discover with the limited mime-vocabulary we've been using to communicate with her, she was dumped in the park by hostiles. They apparently carried her to the park in the trunk of a car. Before that--again, as far as we've been able to understand her meaning--she was kidnapped from her place of residence and carried to this planet on board a ship with faster-than-light travel capacity."

Napoleon snorted, but Waverley was looking thoughtful. "Considering what you have just told us about her physiology, it seems at least a possible solution. Unless Mr. Solo has some objection?"

"I've never believed in UFOs, sir," Napoleon replied. "Couldn't she be some sort of a genetic anomaly? A freak?"

"No," said Illya, before Danforth had a chance to answer. "The alterations, the points of difference are too complex, too comprehensive. If nothing else, her tail brands her non-human--it's prehensile, you know. I've never heard of a human with a muscle-responsive tail. Not even in folk tales."

Napoleon sounded a little exasperated to Illya, but that was nothing new. Napoleon's patience had been rather short on the subject of the ladycat ever since his attempt at an advance had been decisively rejected. "All right, so she's an extra-terrestrial, an ET. What do we do with her now? We surely can't send her back to where she came from."

"Certainly not, Napoleon. Central Park is a nice place to walk in, but people don't live there. Besides, we stand to learn a lot from Thearah."

"There," Danforth corrected. Illya ignored her, and Mr. Waverley had another question.

"How are her language studies coming?"

Thera had been given a tutor, Illya knew, an expert in the teaching of language to deaf children. She was neither deaf nor a child, but she was in a similar situation. They could make no sense, as yet, of her language, so she had to be taught to communicate with them from scratch. But she was intelligent, and interested, and possessed the necessary degree of self-discipline to start to pick up the language almost immediately.

"--very gratifying progress," Danforth was saying. "The oddest thing about it, Mr. Waverley," she darted an evil look at Illya, "is that she appears to have picked up a Russian accent."

"Georgian," Illya corrected her. She ignored him.

"Would you say, then, Miss Danforth, that you have learned all you can from her for the time being?"

Danforth nodded her agreement. "Yes, Mr. Waverley. Once she can communicate more fully in English we'll be able to really make progress."

"Thank you, Miss--er, Dr. Danforth." The doctor knew Mr. Waverley's habit of brusque dismissals, and excused herself with good grace. Illya looked at the little note she slipped him on her way out while Mr. Waverley and Napoleon discussed some reporting commonplace between them. "Seven-thirty this evening, dinner and afters?" Illya signed. Well, he did owe her for several favors.

"--next week," Napoleon was saying. "What's to be done with her in the meantime?" Illya supposed it was unreasonable of him to think they ought to work with Thera every day, until she was able to share her secrets with them. But since her tutors were engaged for weekdays only--there seemed no sense in the notion that she should idle and be bored on Saturday and Sunday.

"She can come and stay with me," Illya said. "Don't look at me like that, Napoleon, what occurs first to you is furthest from my mind. I do have the studio couch, you'll remember."

"Illya, she's all by herself here, and she's bound to be confused--to try to find reassurance." Napoleon was being serious now, Illya knew, and he honored the other man for his concern. For all the "playboy" face that Napoleon liked to wear, he was in his own way as responsible, as mature about his relationships with other people as Illya tried to be. He answered Napoleon's concern as honestly as it had been brought up.

"She is a grown woman, Napoleon. And I'll show her how to lock the bedroom door."

"Bedroom? Since when have you had a bedroom?"

"Since I moved three months ago. I needed more room for my stereo equipment, don't you remember? No, that's right, you were still recovering from your weekend in 'Kazoo' that month. I don't think she's vulnerable in quite that manner, I doubt she needs a chaperone. And she is as tall as I am, Napoleon--I have the utmost confidence in her ability to thrash me if I become too forward. Are you satisfied?"

Napoleon, his misgivings apparently laid to rest, sighed melodramatically and cast his brown eyes heaven-ward. "A weekend...a lovely, exotic, mysterious woman...who doesn't speak English...what more could an unreconstructed chauvinist ask?"

"Money," said Illya to Mr. Waverley. "She can hardly spend all of her time in that hospital shift, it doesn't suit her complexion. I want to draw some money from special expense to buy her some clothes."

"I hadn't known you for a designer, Mr. Kuryakin. What are you going to do about that tail?"

"Danforth will go with me, sir. I think perhaps twelve hundred dollars will do for a start."

Mr. Waverley thought a moment, then gave his consent--somewhat to Illya's surprise. Illya certainly hadn't expected his chief to be so accommodating. "Very well, Mr. Kuryakin. Miss Thompson will give the draft to you after lunch. Gentlemen? I'm not paying you to drink coffee all day."

Illya half-lay contentedly in one of Sigri's hammock-chairs and considered the various prospects for dessert.

The chair was hardly more than a very broad band or sling of soft maroon leather stretched on two horizontal bars, one lower than the other. Very modern, very comfortable, and very silly to be seen in. Illya frequently felt rather silly in Danforth's flat; her ideas of what went into modern decorating made no coherent sense whatever to him. But her idea of proper cooking, ah, that Illya could accept without any trouble whatever. He was full. He was very full. And he felt very smug about it.

Now as she came back into her eclectic living room from turning out the lights in most of the flat he reached around her knees. Her hostess-skirt was one of

those pencil-thin affairs, slit up to the thigh on either side; and in it she was particularly vulnerable to assault from his low-cradled position. It took him little planning and less effort to settle her into his lap; he began to play mouse-under-the-rug with his left hand, scurrying his fingers about her knees beneath her skirt.

"Are all the lights out?" he asked.

"All except the one next to the bed." It was a sunken bed, Illya knew, nearly always done up in white velvet or satin or something; but she would condescend to make the bed with linen sheets when she expected him to spend the night. The bed itself was buried, the mattress clearing the floor level by six or eight inches. Just as well, because Sigri sometimes got too involved in her acrobatics, and the shorter the distance from the sheets to the floor, the less traumatic the falling out of bed was.

She stayed his hand from gaming as they shared the first lover's kiss of the evening, as slow and satisfying as anything could be. He'd known Sigri for years now, had lost almost all of his native shyness of women with her; he was comfortable to sit with her in his lap and play. His fleshly appetites--so fully sated, just now, by Sigri's good cooking, and her excellent taste in wine, and above all her intelligent and diverting conversation--required a small space of amorous play before being roused to anticipate the satisfactions no less complete, if somewhat altered in nature, that the delectable Dr. Danforth would further serve him in the course of their evening's conversation.

At length she rose, pulling him after her, and they made their way unsteadily into the bedroom, each a trifle drunk with passion. And as Illya followed her through the door into her dimly cool bedroom, somehow a single stray thought intruded upon his pleasant anticipation of the joys to be had of that sweet lady's flesh, of the soft cries of pleasure he would have from her to confirm and encourage the effectiveness, the completeness of his pleasing of her.

He wondered what Sigri would look like with a tail....

* * *

Thera was a little puzzled to realize that for all the built-in stress of her situation--marooned on a backward planet, no way of getting away, no one to speak her language--she was actually enjoying herself immensely.

Illerah and the doctor--Sigirri, Illerah called her, when they weren't in the

clinic--had been out all day shopping. Thera had been at first concerned about where the credits were coming from--she knew she had no money. Sigirri had explained that the few ornaments on the simple dress Thera had been wearing were of great value--a gem called "tayment." Illerah had seemed as surprised to hear that as Thera was; he'd made some comment about that explaining the good nature of one called Waverley, and that had been an end to it.

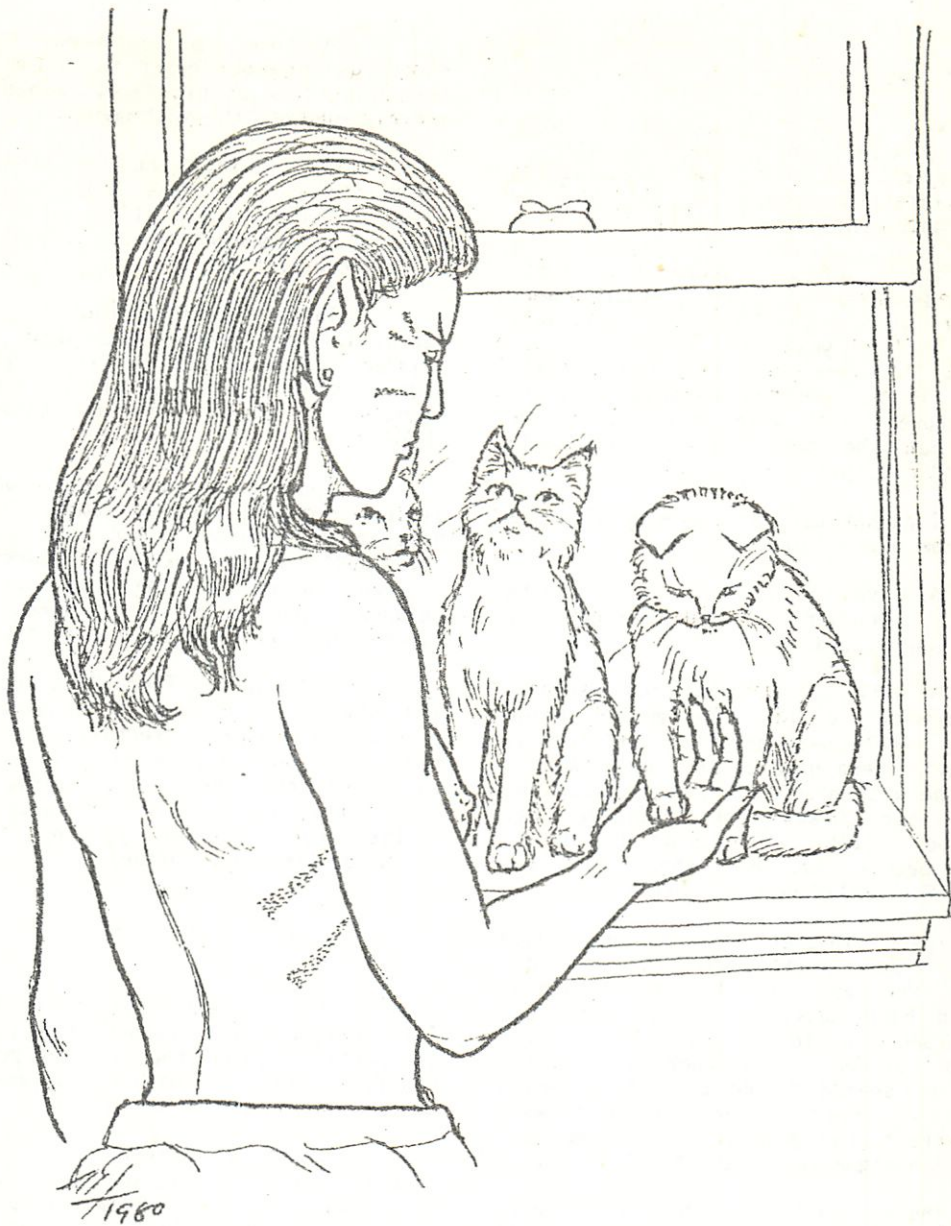
Thera soon forgot her concern over that detail in the interesting business of shopping. Sigirri had helped her; Thera knew by now that her tail was a highly abnormal feature among these people, and her new associates wished to preserve the polite fiction that Thera was no different from them. Thera understood that she was being introduced to salespersons as a relative of Illerah's. Evidently Illerah was somewhat of a foreigner himself--Thera knew that his accent was a little different, her musical ear was sharp to such things--and the explanation evidently covered any of the trouble she had speaking "English" quite adequately.

She had carried some of her purchases with her, leaving the rest to be delivered. Now as Illerah busied himself in the kitchen, preparing--she hoped--some more of that wonderful hot spice he did so well, Thera stood in the bedroom, admiring her new clothes. All were skirted, and all the skirts were long; but Thera danced in long skirts, and so that was no trouble to her.

There was one garment she had insisted on--it had been very expensive, but it was quite similar to a garment Han Solo had given her to wear in Rijnstaten, and so she had sentimental attachments to the "sari"--quite apart from the fact that she was comfortable in one. She was admiring the skirt as she re-settled the pleats; she would put the choli on before she went out, she understood that this society deemed the baring of one's breasts a rather blunt demand for sexual intercourse. Thera was just running the heavily embroidered border through her fingers when she chanced to see, in the mirror, the company that waited not-very-patiently on the windowsill.

She wasn't sure whether she recognized the--she knew the word now, it was "cat"--from her first evening; there were two more cats that she could see, balanced on the bedroom windowsill, stretched necks and paws patting the windowpane urgently suggesting that she invite them in. It took her very little time to figure the mechanism of the window out; but, once open, the cats did not come into the room, but sat on the sill to talk. The little orange-and-black queen spoke first.

"Is it true what this-house's-cat says? You speak The Language?"



"I understand better than I speak," Thera answered. "Your dialect is foreign to me."

"You also are foreign, yes? Where do you come from? How are you called? Are there more of you?"

"Where is the catfriend fishgiver? Does he give you fish also? Are you Sharing with him?"

"Will your kits look like you, or like us? How did you come to look like that?"

"Do you have toms like yourself? Show me your front paw please."

Thera complied with this last, protesting her confusion. "Please, gentle

ones, I cannot hear you all at once. I am not Sharing with Illerah. He Shares with Sigirri."

"Is Sigirri the one of your size, with dark fur also?" the orange cat asked. "He Shares with others, too." Thera digested this comment while "this-house's-cat" examined her hand, patting at her fingers.

"You have no claws," this-house's-cat remarked. "But you go tailed. You have only two paps. Are your litters only two?"

"I have no litter!" Thera didn't know if she was put out at their prying or amused at their innocent, childlike, apparently insatiable curiosity. Their notions of politeness were obviously of a less reserved nature than Thera's.

"Did they take you also to be unsexed?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Why no kits then? It is very simple. I, myself, had only one litter," the orange cat remarked, matter-of-factly. Thera was rather shocked. How could they be so casual about children?

"It is of no concern, two-foot-cat," the orange-and-black cat assured her. "If it were not for The Place, we would only have our litters yearly, and our children would die. I am the only of my family still living." Thera reminded herself that in this culture cats were not considered people; that she only, apparently, could speak "The Language".

"I cannot talk any more now," Thera said. "Come back tomorrow."

"Are you truly not Sharing with catfriend fishgiver?" The orange cat sounded disappointed.

"I will be up later for scraps," this-house's-cat said. "You might remind catfriend. There have been few meat-scraps, this week." Thera gave assent, uncertain as to what she was agreeing to, and closed the window as her guests took themselves off across the roofs of adjoining buildings. She had better put her choli on, she decided. She smelled fresh "coffee."

Thera finished dressing and padded out into the common-room in her new slippers. Her feet were all but healed now, but she'd been walking all day, and the soft-cushioned fabric was cool against the bottoms of her feet. Yes, there was coffee, but Illerah seemed to be out of the room just at the moment. Thera was just wondering where he had gone when the communications device signalled--the "phone" "rang."

Thera considered the phone mistrustfully. What was she supposed to do about it? Thera made her decision; she crossed to the phone and picked up the one piece of it. Illerah was nowhere to be seen. She had seen enough of the device's use; the portion nearest the cord, you spoke into that, and you put the other end to your ear. Now, what was it that Illerah always said to the phone?

"Kooriakin," Thera said.

She was rewarded by a brief silence and then a sudden flow of words, smooth, connected, the accent unfamiliar. She caught only a portion of the meaning--oh, dear. She must have done it wrong. She was still standing with the phone, in utmost puzzlement, when Illerah came back into the room from the hall; she held out the instrument to him, asking as plainly as she could to be rescued.

"Illerah?"

He took the instrument from her, nodding with what seemed to Thera to be a reassuring look on his face. Aloud he said merely, and into the instrument:

"Kooriakin." And after a moment: "Oh, is that you then, Simon? --She's a friend of mine. No, it's not like that. All right. Wensday? Make it next weekend, and you can meet her."

Thera retreated into the kitchen, watching from around the door timidly. Illerah seemed a little cross, though he didn't seem cross at her, especially. Perhaps she should not have answered the phone.

Soon the conversation was over. Illerah replaced the instrument, shook his head at it. "Simon, Simon. Don't you ever give up?" Thera couldn't understand it; Illerah seemed to be talking to the telephone, but he'd set it down. Illerah looked up, caught her looking at him.

"I'm sorry, Thera," he apologized--and she noticed that he could, indeed, pronounce her name correctly, when it suited him. "I should have been here to take the call. No, no, you did just fine; Simon is like that, that's all. His accent? He's British, not American. It's not important. Would you like some coffee?"

* * *

It had been five months now since Illya Kuryakin had rescued the ladycat from the park. Ladycat, that was the pet name he had fallen into the habit of using--strictly where Napoleon couldn't hear, of course.

Napoleon referred to Thera as "catlady," off and on; but that designation didn't sound right to Illya. It put him too much in mind of a villainess on one of those perfectly awful television shows--"camp," the media had called it. That cat-lady had been sly, deceitful, cruel, sharp around the edges, competitive, dishonest. And not very bright, as she was constantly defeated--as the format of the program had indeed demanded.

Illya didn't think of Thera in that manner at all. Cunning, and slyness, they implied an animal order of intelligence. Thera was quite definitely of a human order of intelligence, though some of her thought patterns remained incomprehensible to Illya. He didn't think that was just because she was a woman. He understood Sigri fairly well, he thought. Then again Thera was neither deceitful nor cruel, dishonest nor abrasive. She fit his perception of that ill-defined category of womanhood, a lady. She was polite without

being self-effacing, she was concerned for the comfort of her companions without being clinging or servile; she was a lady.

Illya enjoyed her company very much. The time or two when Illya had been busy all weekend and Illya's friend Simon had taken her to London Illya had found himself missing her, and looking forward to having her back.

He was trying very hard not to be possessive of her. Whether or not she was sleeping with Simon, Illya did not know; and he told himself sternly that it was none of his business. Then he endeavored to convince himself that he really meant it. He knew that Thera had become very desirable to him, even apart from the fascinating influence her tail wielded over his daydreaming imagination. But she was his guest, was staying with him, and for him to have made a sexual advance would have violated Illya's notion of hospitality in a very profound manner. She was his guest, and vulnerable to a certain extent because of that. It was all the more important that he not try to take unfair advantage of her gratitude.

But it was becoming very difficult for him to maintain his chivalrous attitude.

Sigri was a great help to him; she was very understanding. He and Sigri had talked about his increasing difficulty with Thera; Sigri did not tease him, for once, as Napoleon surely would have done. Sigri had other friends, and did not take Illya's moping to heart as a personal insult as another of Illya's lady-friends might have. He was moping. He had not been to bed with Sigri for several weeks now.

Illya was certain that Napoleon knew what kind of conflict Illya had within himself about Thera, and Napoleon, being Illya's friend after all, had not begun to tease him yet. Illya was also certain that Napoleon would have declined to interfere, and the manner of Napoleon's declining would have been to tease.

Illya was thinking about some of these things as he climbed the last flight of stairs to his flat. The elevator in this building had always made him nervous. He had been out all morning, doing one thing and another; mostly thinking. He scarcely realized until he actually stood at his door that the odd music he had heard on the last landing was actually coming from his apartment. Sounded like a raga; Thera seemed particularly interested in all the different kinds of music he could expose her to, from the symphony to his favorite jazz. Oh, so now she'd found something new to listen to. He put his keys to the locks quietly, so as not to disturb her enjoyment of the music; and he went in.

She did not see him at first. She had her back to him; and she was dancing.

Illya stood quite still and watched. It was a kind of dancing he had never seen, and she danced with her tail as well as her hands and her presently bare feet; less overtly sexual than an exotic dancer, a belly dancer, but much more sensual than any dancing Illya could remember seeing.

He couldn't help but stare, she was as graceful, as seductive, as--as--and her tail danced counterpoint, he hadn't seen her do anything like this before, she was almost irresistible, Illya felt his blood stir quickly to a passionate desire that almost overtook him, drowned him in a sudden shameful fantasy of taking her with violence on the rug--

She turned and swayed with the alien patterns of her dancing. Suddenly she was facing him, saw him. She stopped in the middle of a step, her face pale with startled embarrassment, her mouth half-open in surprise. Illya looked at her mouth and knew that if he didn't move away from her, now, he was going to embrace her whether she wished it or not, he was that dangerously close to using coercive force. He had to do something, quickly, before the sight of her half-raised tail, of her sharp feline teeth only half-hidden behind her parted lips, maddened him entirely.

He could not speak. He brushed past her abruptly, and went through into the bedroom. He closed the door. There, he was safe from himself, she was safe from him. What was he going to do? She surely must have seen his criminal impulse in his face. Illya crossed to the window, opened it, leaned out over the windowsill on his forearms, trying to collect himself. She was his guest, why did he have to lust so shamefully after her?

* * *

Thera stared after Illerah at the closed bedroom door, puzzled--or, rather, startled, a little confused. She'd caught looks similar to the one he had just worn on his face off and on in the past months. Then, as now, he would break contact and put distance between them. She had wondered what the problem was; now she felt she had an insight as to what was going on.

Oh, was that it? Was that all? Thera brought to mind a comment Illerah's friend Simon had made to her once. Thera had been surprised at a familiarity Simon took; and had told Simon sternly--between teasing and true affront--that "Illerah didn't do things like that." And Simon had answered--as he proceeded to elaborate on the liberties he was taking--that whereas he, Simon, had no such self-discipline, "Illerah has the instincts of a gentleman." Thera turned that idea over in her mind, nodding slowly to herself. Yes. The

instincts of a gentleman. Thera was going to have to see what she could do about that.

* * *

"Maybe I'd better go live in a hotel for a few days," Illya told the cat. He told the cat in Russian, and he didn't think the cat spoke Russian, but it probably didn't make any difference. Besides, this way the cat couldn't carry tales to Thera.

"But then I'd have to come up with some good reason, convince her. No, that wouldn't work. She's got to know by now that I've been watching her. Oh, not through keyholes, understand that. This is not a very comfortable situation."

The cat seemed at least aware that he was distressed, and responded, as a cat will, with loving affection to soothe him. She rubbed her face along his jaw, kissing him, purring loudly, kneading the windowsill and his forearms alternatively in a positive orgy of placation. Then Illya heard the sound of the door opening behind him; the cat kissed him one final time, then jumped down into the room.

Illya knew the cat would go into the kitchen to find the bowl of scraps he generally set out for her. He also knew that the cat's departure left him alone in the room with Thera. Alone in the bedroom with Thera. He straightened, closing the window. "I'd better be going back to the office," he said. He wasn't looking at her. "End of month reports--"

"Illerah." There was a throaty, cajoling note in her voice that he had not heard before. "It is the middle of your month."

"Yes, and I'm still doing last month's reports, that's how far behind I am. Well, I'll just be going, you don't need me for anything this afternoon, do you?" Illya still did not want to look at Thera, but her next few words brought him around face-to-face with her regardless.

"I do not need, no. You need, Illerah." He stared at her fixedly, at her beguiling mouth, at her pointed ears usually hidden by her carefully combed hair, at the catface markings frequently camouflaged with makeup or powder, and he tried desperately to put some construction other than the obvious on what she had just said. He tried to retreat, but the bureau was behind him, his escape routes were blocked, and she continued to assault his self-control with wheedling phrases.

"Illerah, you are not happy, you are not content. I can make you content, Illerah. Why do you not wish me to content you? I know that I am pleasing. Why are

you not willing to be pleased?"

He closed his eyes against her words, trying not to hear them, trying to tell his masculinity that it was all fantasy, that there was not a desirable woman in the bedroom pouting because he wouldn't make love to her--or, worse yet, let her make love to him.

Unfortunately, his masculinity was not listening. No, his masculinity was all attention, eager to set to work and solve the problem at once. Illya wanted to get out now, before he died of terminal embarrassment. Tomorrow, first thing, he would buy one of those books on yoga that explained how a man could control and discipline these humiliating betrayals by his own body. Maybe today. If he hurried, he could probably get out to the book-seller's before it closed--

She was standing too close not to notice, he was certain. Illya was ready to die of mortification. What must she think of him, lusting at a moment's notice? Desperately he sent one last urgent warning to his masculine gender, one last attempt to regain mastery of the situation. "I'll put you on a diet of--of--of journalism students from Eugene and--" he warned himself sternly. For a moment it seemed as if it might work.

Then Thera nuzzled through the hair behind his ear to nip sharply at the back of his neck with her dainty little fangs, and Illya quit trying and surrendered.

* * *

A "gentleman." Thera was unsure what precisely that might mean, in this still-unfamiliar language. Apparently one of the things it meant was that Illerah would not take the initiative, would not solicit loving congress with her. This was perfectly acceptable to Thera, as far as it went. She only hoped that the sexual passivity that the word "gentleman" seemed to imply did not extend to Illerah's total range of sexual behaviors--there was, after all, only so much she could do with him without his help.

But taking her perception of Illerah into account, Thera didn't think she'd have much of a problem. The difficulty, as she saw it, would be to initiate their love-making well and truly, leave Illerah in no doubt at all that what they were doing was, indeed, fucking. From what this-house's-cat had told Thera off and on Illerah would enter into such sport enthusiastically, though of course this-house's-cat had been able to make judgments as to competence only on the basis of how late Illerah slept the morning after.



All Thera had to do was get Illerah into the bed, and subsequent exercises would take care of themselves. But she did have to get him into the bed, and soon. Thera had been very intrigued by some of the things this-house's-cat had told her. Thera wanted to verify.

She nuzzled at the side of his throat, sensed his pulse racing strongly beneath the light touch of her lips. She tasted him with her tongue, little teasing licks, burrowing with her nose child-like into the hair behind his ears; he made no move to stop her, but his frame, she felt, was tense with resistance. And how, Thera thought to herself wickedly, how are Heildie kits taken in hand by their parents, when naughty? She snaked her neck around, she found the back of his neck. His flesh was hot; he smelled like a field of fodder ripe for drying. Delicately Thera opened her little mouth, delicately she nipped him sharply at the back of his neck, in token that he was to behave.

Illerah seemed at once more tense and less tense now. Thera drew her head back to look at him; his eyes were more blue, more bright, than she could remember

seeing them. His dour mouth seemed charmingly altered, vulnerable, his lips half-parted now; and his eyes danced about Thera where she stood, admiring her, accepting the idea of loving with her. Thera felt wonderfully evil, affectionately evil. Poor Illerah, it seemed now that he had been struggling so sternly with himself, and it was so unnecessary... For the moment he was helpless, she could do what she wanted with him. To him.

She ran the lacquered nail of one little finger cat-teasingly over his mouth, first his lower lip, then tracing the delineation of the upper before she returned to his full and promising underlip--that gave the lie to his habitually unmoved expression--once more. She laughed, and she took him by the hand, and she practically forced him down until he sat upon the bed; then she could be cruel in the face of his desire, his confusion, no longer, and sat down laughing next to him, and put her arms around his neck as his met around her back to tumble him over and kiss him.

She almost wondered if she had been wise, if she had been kind to ignore his building passion for so long. The violence

of his need was all but frightening, and his self-restraint in the face of his need was awesome. She felt his tension, knew his torment in the strength of his arms around her--muscles flexed against themselves, his kiss but gently passionate for all the shakiness of his breathing. He was so careful, so very careful of her, careful not to ravish her with the violence that she would have barely tolerated even in such a situation. She wondered at his courtesy, and promised herself that she would make him proper thanks for his gentle handling...but first things first. He would not ravish her? Very well, she would ravish him.

He was lying on his side, it was easy to push him onto his back. She crouched above him where he lay, her hands to his shoulders to indicate that he was not to move, and snarled ferociously into his startled face. Her antics succeeded in bringing the lightness, the sportive gaming back into the focus of this passage; Thera did not believe that sex was to be taken too seriously. He threw his hands up, his arms bent at the elbow, his hands laying palm-up on the pillow in what Thera recognized as a standard gesture of submission. Thera nodded once, decisively, in triumph. "I'll teach you to listen to your ladycat," she said, and raked her nailed hands down across his breast with no little force.

He caught his breath; Thera saw his eyes close briefly with the pleasure of it. She considered undressing him; but no, he was wearing one of those high-necked pullover shirts of his, and she felt the situation demanded a more direct assault than the pause to deal with his clothing would allow. There would be time for that later.

Thera had no hesitation, no uncertainty in approaching Illerah sexually. Simon had explained to her all she needed to know about the physical nature of males of this planet.

She was worrying at the fastenings of his trousers, and as she stroked the zipper down Illerah roused himself from his posture of mock-submission to do something, she didn't know what. She didn't care. Thera was being stern. She caught his hands in mid-air, relented so far as to position them along her skirted thighs; she shook her finger at him. "You behave yourself," Thera warned. "You must mind your manners, young man." Then she turned her attention back to the interesting and inconvenient underwear he was wearing. Simon certainly didn't wear these...

But Determination and Perseverance Triumphed over the modesty of Illerah's personal linen, and she was finally able to take the most telling of indications of the urgency of her mission firmly in hand. She paused to examine him, all proud and stiff and swollen as he was, stroking him

delicately with the ball of one finger-tip as Illerah moaned and gripped her upper thighs convulsively. Thera thought he was rather charming, actually, childlike in the simplicity of his need, so trusting that she would comfort him. And Illerah's fur was a different color than his hair--now, that was interesting.

This stroking, this caressing and playing, could give much pleasure, Thera knew. To judge from Illerah's cries, her lack of formal training in this matter did not detract from her ability to generalize. She set herself to pleasure him much aroused herself by his so-gratifying reactions to her caresses; she would have to tell Simon that Illerah particularly enjoyed--no, perhaps she shouldn't tell Simon that.

Illerah sought her hips, her buttocks, with his hands beneath her skirt; it was awkward, crouched or half-sitting as she was over his thighs, but she turned briefly to one side to permit his taking down the bit of cotton she wore; to permit him to render her accessible to him. And when she took up her position again, imprisoning him between her knees, it was no longer to pleasure him with teasing. His hands caught her buttocks, holding her possessively, and Thera steadied herself by holding his forearms in turn and cried out herself in surprised pleasure as he sheathed himself in her.

His pleasure seemed transcendent, he seemed totally captured in the strong joyful passion that possessed him. Thera set herself to prolonging his pleasure, increasing the intensity of his experience. Between the sharing of their now-joined flesh and her awareness of his pleasure--her affection for him, even--it was almost as if his range of pleasures was hers, as if she experienced him and also knew his sensations in experiencing her. It was a rare thing, this mutual sharing, this empathy. Thera would make it last as long as she could.

Thera was a dancer, with a dancer's, an athlete's muscular control. And she was sharing with a man who, though alien, had become important to her, one she loved--if only in friendly fashion. And these two circumstances she combined to draw his pleasure out until the dark warm tides of his dissolution rose to drown them both in the sweet sleep of the body's uttermost pleasure...

* * *

For the first few moments of his waking Illya was terribly confused.

He noticed first the light. Who had left the lights on? No, it was the wrong kind of light. Daylight. What was he doing in bed in broad daylight? He

half-turned, to ask Thera; then found himself even more confused by that solution. Wait a minute. Thera? What was Thera doing--

And then he remembered, and lay back upon the pillows, staring at the ceiling. Oh, yes, he remembered. It had been--remarkable. More remarkable still, it seemed his body also remembered; Illya felt the beginnings of a faint stirring in his loins, and thought stern thoughts at himself, lecturing.

What are you thinking of, are you out of your mind? After what you've been through? Go back to sleep, you shameless...

He didn't remember the undressing, but he was definitely undressed. Mother-naked, Napoleon would have called it. Probably Thera had seen to it, as she had so efficiently--so completely--seen to him. Illya turned on his side to watch Thera. Now, she was still dressed. How could that be considered proper? Dreadful asymmetry. As Illya watched Thera--aware of him, he thought to himself, even in her sleep--woke easily. She yawned in his face, and smiled at him full of self-satisfaction.

"You're pretty," she said. She curled her tail around his waist, petting his buttocks with its tip. Illya caught at her tail, and turned to lie on his back once more, examining it. He hadn't permitted himself to attend to the problem of her tail nearly as much as he would have liked, ere now. Nor had he handled her tail before. It was a wonderful tail, a fascinating tail. It kept trying to escape, but Illya had caught it now, and was not inclined to release his prisoner until he had studied it in detail and at great length. He looked up at Thera, who was sitting now beside him as he lay blissfully relaxed and naked on the bed.

"You," he said, "are a witch."

Thera looked mock-horrified. Illya continued relentlessly. "A witch, a sorceress. Do you know what we used to do with witches in my native Russia?"

She made a wide-eyed face. "We skin them," Illya told her, rising himself to start playing with the fastenings of her blouse. "We skin them alive. We start with their blouses, I think. And then we take their skirts. And when they're truly evil--we tickle their earlobes, much like this--"

* * *

It had been ten months now since he had found Thera.

In ten months Illya had been

intrigued by her, then passionately fascinated by her, and finally happily content with her. But all good things did end, he knew that. At least, usually. And it seemed that it was about time for his domestic bliss to end also. Napoleon had been hinting at it for weeks; now--since Napoleon had asked Illya to meet him in Mr. Waverley's office--Illya had a pretty fair notion that Napoleon would come out with it.

"Well, Illya, you're certainly looking--well," Napoleon greeted him. "Put on a few extra pounds, have you?"

"Cat food," Illya explained, patting his flat belly. "I recommend it, Napoleon. I can't pronounce it, but I recommend it."

"Pronunciation," Napoleon seemed thoughtful. "Yes, that was one of our clues. We think we may have a problem, Illya."

Illya murmured some polite invitation to Napoleon to elaborate, but Mr. Waverley was the one who took up the refrain.

"There are some interesting and unusual people looking for you, Mr. Kuryakin. They show your picture, ask for 'Illya Kuragin'--or close to that. Indications are that they came to New York in roughly the same manner as your friend Thera did."

"Thera's people?" asked Illya. He was rather startled, shaken at the idea. "Why would they be looking for me?"

"Unclear at this time," Napoleon answered. "But there's been enough input over the past two days to make us nervous, Illya. We're moving you in to headquarters here for a little while, until we get this figured out. And we'd like to get Thera out of New York entirely--send her under cover to one of the safe zones."

Illya had been expecting Napoleon to tell him that Thera had to leave. There had been no hint of trouble to date, but THRUSH could be counted on to take advantage of Illya's situation sooner or later. He knew Thera would have to go, for her own safety. He couldn't quite believe that Thera had possibly put him in danger.

"Yes, of course, Napoleon. Your flat is not among the safe zones under consideration, I take it. As soon as possible, please. Do we have a place ready for her?"

"Dubuque," Napoleon said. "Boring, probably, but safe. We'd like to move her as soon as possible, too. I don't know how to say this, Illya--but something distinctly funny is going on, and I don't like it--"

* * *

Illya elected to walk from the major thoroughfare rather than have the taxi take him directly to his door. It was dark, now, true, but he wanted time to think, to decide how he was going to break the news to Thera. The ride by cab had been too short. Walking the last few blocks was almost habit to him in any case; it was easier for him to know he was being followed when he was on foot.

Either they were much better than he had expected, or he was too absorbed in this new problem to pay proper attention to his surroundings; or perhaps both. For whatever reason, they took Illya completely by surprise, and almost on his own doorstep. Illya had time for one thought only--that one, there, he seemed to have face-markings roughly similar to Thera's, and his ears were pointed like hers, and his tail twitched from under the black tunic--then Illya went down and out.

Thera expected Illerah home soon now. She felt rather pleased with herself; she had been to the bookseller's today, and she had found a pillow-book that had pictures she felt sure would make Illerah blush. They had made her blush, looking at them. Her embarrassment had not prevented her from looking, though, nor from becoming curious about several of the positions and games described; she felt confident that Illerah would also be intrigued.

She was in the bedroom, wondering where best to put this book where Illerah would find it on his own, when the sound came at the windowsill--an urgent scraping of claws, demanding attention. Demanding immediate attention. This was odd; Thera had had the discussion about manners with this-house's-cat months ago.

Concerned, Thera went to the window, drew the blind up, opened it. The cat that crouched tensely on the windowsill was not this-house's-cat, but one of the neighborhood cats; the defensive posture, head sunk between shoulders, feet placed for immediate dash to safety, belly low to the ground, all this communicated fear and sudden anxiety to Thera in an instant, before the cat even spoke. What, was there trouble? Were boys teasing this-house's-cat again? A dog loose in The Territory?

"Twofoot cat, be concerned for cat-friend fishgiver--Enemies have him, his sounds are of injury, twofoot cat--come now, bring others."

Thera struggled to extract the meaning from the cat's heavily accented and

disconnected speech. What was it saying about Illerah? In some sort of trouble, someone was hurting him? She should call Napoleon, she should call Simon--

"Come now, clumsy slow-moving large one! They will injure him, and who will you Share with? Who will feed this-house's-cat? Make your feet bare, we must climb. I will take you. Now!"

The cat jumped the few feet down from the windowsill to the first rungs of the fire escape's metal stair, and waited, standing, obviously unwilling to wait. Thera, infected by the cat's urgency, the cat's anxiety, did not do the sensible thing and call for help; no, she pulled on her grip-soled sneakers, and climbed out of the window to follow the cat. She was wearing a wraparound skirt, but she couldn't stop to change it, she could only hope that it wouldn't hinder her too much.

Nor did it. The cat led her by a way that was not too difficult for one of Thera's background; her training as a dancer had given her both knowledge and confidence in her physical abilities, and she could almost run as fast as the cat wanted her to. She had her bad moments, her moments of fear, when she had to jump from roof to roof over a gap of several feet; but Thera gathered her skirts up in her hand, hoped that no one was looking, and jumped. She did think that it was unlikely she'd be seen, running over the rooftops, from fire-escape to water-tank; the night was clear, there were no clouds to hold and refract the city's light, and there was no moon.

She was totally disoriented by the time the cat stopped her, and told her that she must be very quiet now. The cat led her down through one cross-alley into another, till just ahead Thera heard a cry that chilled her, that turned her stomach. A cry of pain, short and sharp, as if cut off in the middle--Illerah's cry--

Thera held to the shadow of the eight-foot garbage bin as she angled her head around. Here she could see without being seen. She heard voices, speaking--speaking Standard, and she looked past the near pair of beings that spoke together in low tones to the lighted portion of the alley--perhaps twenty feet distant--where the pantherix spoke with a cruel sort of humor to Illerah.

"What, d'you mean that joint isn't supposed to bend that way? Aw, Uncle, why didn't you tell me?"

The speaker was one of the pair who held Illerah, held him as he fell to his knees. The grunted cry Thera had heard and her spying of Illerah were all but simultaneous; and as Thera watched she saw Illerah's head fall between his shoulders as

late--or early--hour. "With Sigri."

Han stuck his head back in, said something to Thera. She bit her lip, and turned back to Illya, kissing his mouth briefly as she got up to follow Han out. "I am going, Illerah. I will always remember you, with fondness." She was almost out the door now, one final message. "And Illerah? Don't forget to feed the cat."

This tickled Illya. He knew it would hurt a little, when he really realized that she was gone; he would have to live with a certain emptiness for a bit. But he would live. And he would not be too dreadfully lonely. Illya thought fond parting thoughts about Thera; and then he caught a bit of dialogue between Napoleon and the one English-speaking ET.

"--significant temporal--is that the word?--anomaly, even across short jumps. Several of your years, possibly, even in just a cross-hemisphere jump."

"So you're saying that the point in our time that these people ditched your Kosciuszko in Seattle--Settleport, you call it--could have been as much as twenty years in the future, in respect to the point in our time that they left the--pantherix, did you call her?--in Central Park."

"Exactly. The problem isn't that His Excellency isn't in Settleport. He just isn't there yet. The Captain and Stildyne, they're off with your Mr. Waverley now, talking to the ship--"

It was all much too complicated reasoning for Illya to trouble himself with it, especially at this time of night. He settled himself in his chair as comfortably as he could, and mustered his scant remaining energies to take a nap.

When he woke it was several hours later, to judge from the stubble on Napoleon's face. There was some sort of commotion, a bustling, raised voices--male and female--that was what had waked him. Illya squinted in the light, waiting till his eyes would focus; he caught sight of a blond head, a man in dark clothing, and came awake all at once. Illya made to rise, nearly fell as his too-relaxed frame threatened to buckle; Napoleon came to his rescue, and he leaned on Napoleon and stared.

He stared back at himself from across a few feet of floor. Himself, looking a little harder, older--but not physically--Illya thought for a moment that he faced the wolf-Kuryakin in this man who confronted him. Then he realized, no, this man was Kosciuszko--it was no wonder the ETs had mistaken Illya for him.

Illya was uncomfortably aware of

his present rumpled, unkempt condition. Normally he paid little attention to his clothing, so long as it was clean, in good repair, and not too bright or flashy. Facing this Kosciuszko--Kosciuszko having apparently already changed back into his uniform--Illya was suddenly sensitive of every wrinkle in his slept-in trousers. He was sure that Kosciuszko was eyeing him with pained displeasure. The other man was impeccably pressed and polished, tailored to a dangerously elegant perfection. Illya took comfort in the fact that the other's hair seemed, like his, to defy the most dedicated efforts at combing it neatly.

As Illya--and Napoleon--stared at the other man, Kosciuszko looked back over his shoulder at the uniformed pantherix that had broken Illya's arm, and said something in what was apparently the language the ETs used in common. The pantherix replied, glancing quickly at Illya, ending his answer with an apologetic shrug. The pantherix was rewarded with such a look of icy disapproval that Illya almost felt sorry for his own tormentor. Illya also wished he knew how "Kosciuszko" did such things--he could have used such an expression on Napoleon to good effect.

While the interchange between Kosciuszko and the pantherix was taking place Illya spoke to Napoleon softly, still trying to wake up.

"What's he doing here? I thought he wasn't here until 1984."

"Apparently they picked him up in '88," Napoleon replied. "Direct from their ship. The computer gave them approximate dates, they just sent teams down till they got a hit. I gather Kosciuszko wasn't too happy about it--he'd been living fairly comfortably in Seattle for several years--"

Illya decided he was going to have a headache, on top of everything else. "That doesn't explain what he's doing in New York now."

"Had to come police up their stragglers here at HQ, I suppose," Napoleon speculated thoughtfully. "Or maybe he shares your renowned Russian inquisitiveness, my friend. Wouldn't you be the least bit curious about a man running around with your face on?"

"But it is my face, Napoleon, and he has no right to be wearing it. Surely your American civil rights organizations would have very strong words about this preemption of my likeness--"

"Your face?" Kosciuszko turned from his conversation with the now-thoroughly-scolded pantherix to favor Illya himself with his pale-eyed glare. Illya was a little startled, but chided his less-than-alert self for being startled. Hadn't

Napoleon just said Kosciuszko had been in Seattle for some time? Of course Kosciuszko spoke English--although with an accent that was a little odd, even to Illya.

"On the contrary, it is my countenance you are discussing! The very idea. Permit me to remind you Kuragin--Kuryakin--whatever you call yourself--I quite possibly have children your age. There," Kosciuszko turned to the two women who had apparently come in with him, and gestured in Illya's direction with his left hand. "He'll do just as well, won't he? You can have that one. Take him to visit your friend in Pittsburgh."

But the entire party of ETs was hustled out of the room now, the women complaining after "Andrei" bitterly. Illya supposed they were all leaving, and hoped the women would be returned to Seattle where

they came from--1988. That reference to Pittsburgh had sounded ominous.

The silence in the near-empty room was deafening; Illya sat down at the table again, and stared out into mid-air.

Napoleon hesitated, then joined him; he poured them each a cup of cold black coffee. Illya drank the vile stuff without comment; presently Napoleon spoke.

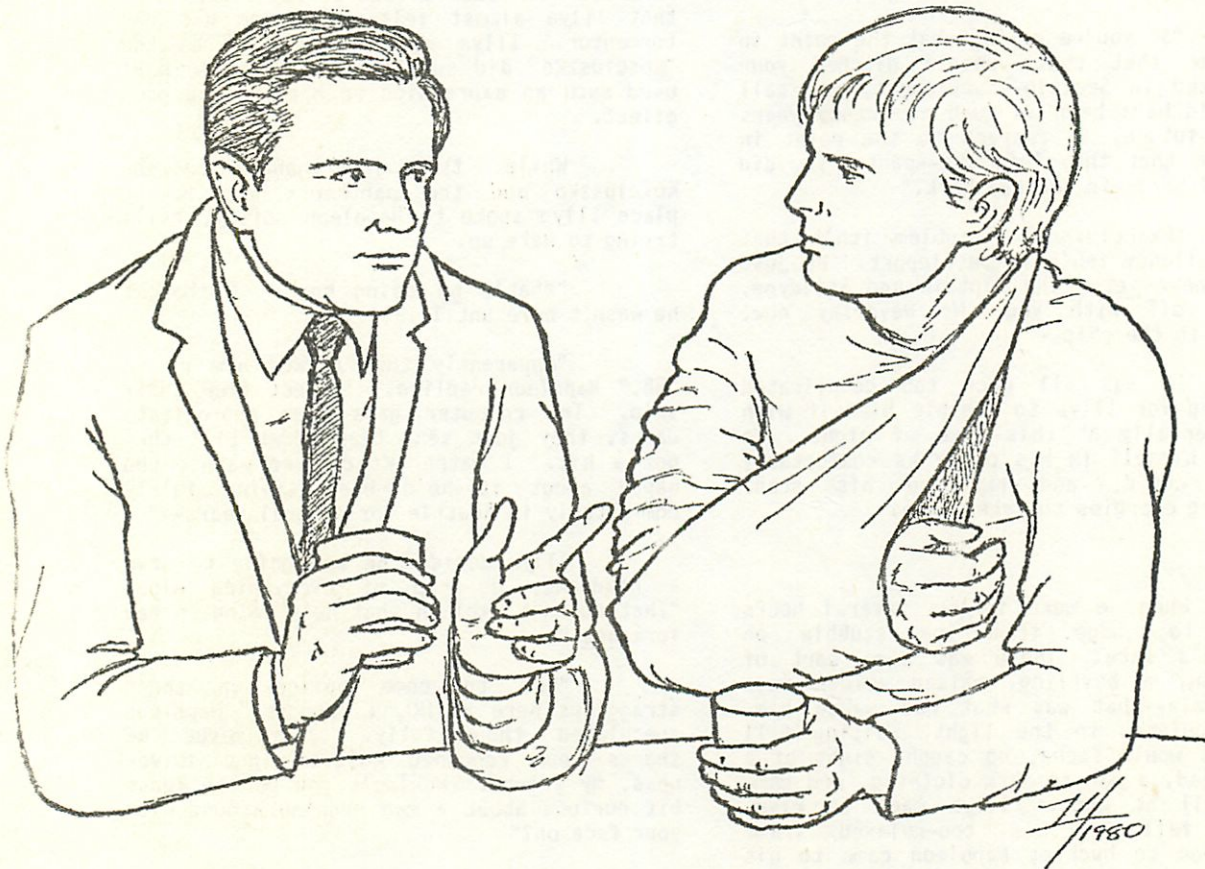
"Illya?"

"Yes, Napoleon."

"Illya...next time you want to walk through the park on your way home--"

"Yes, Napoleon?"

"Illya...for heaven's sake...don't."



* * * For the past year Susan Matthews has been trying to professionally market her *Ragnarok* stories, which have appeared in various fanzines. Her agent feels she has a good chance to sell her stories, and thus she made the decision to pull all her *Ragnarok*-related stories from fan publishers, with the exception of three, whose

'zines were too far along in the publishing process for this to be done. The three exceptions are EQUAL SPACE 2, TOSOP 5, and TIME WARP 5. All previously-published material will be out of print when the last copies are sold. There will be no authorized reprints of *Ragnarok*-related material.

AFTER THE FALL

*Music traditional,
'Joe Hill' (Robinson-Hayes)
Words by Pat Stanley, Aimee Weber,
Jani Hicks, Linda Stoops
(c) 1976 MCA Music, Inc.*

I dreamed I saw a friend last night,
Alive as you or me.
Says I to him, I saw you fall.
I never died, says he;
I never died, says he.

The Dark Lord came and killed you, friend--
He cut you down, says I.
Takes more than light to kill a man:
Says he, I didn't die;
Says he, I didn't die.

And standing there as big as life
And smiling with his eyes
My old friend turned to me and said,
The Force is on your side;
The Force is on your side.

From Alderaan to Yavin 4
For those concerned with right,
We'll try to be a guiding hand,
And lead them to the light;
And lead them to the light.



Reflections in the Mirror

Crystal Ann Taylor

Captain's log.

The *Enterprise* has been ordered to the planet Demetzia to suppress an uprising that has destroyed the regular garrison there. The continued loyalty of the natives is imperative because, although Demetzia is in one of the star-systems controlled by the Empire, the entire area is under dispute with the Klingons. Judging from Mr. Spock's report on the populace's military capabilities, I'm confident that we shall have no trouble squelching this insurrection.

Kirk and Spock beamed down with a full security force. They were met by Eliter, the head of the Demetzian council. Eliter bowed and began a short speech of welcome, but Kirk brusquely brushed the formalities aside and demanded, "Where can we set up headquarters?"

Eliter motioned toward the nearby building. "If you'll follow me, gentlemen." He led the way to a large room filled with desks, tables, and computers. "Will this do?"

Kirk nodded and turned to the leader of the security party. "Lt. Nu-kote, take charge of setting up the garrison here. Use standard occupation procedure. Get intelligence started on their part. Notify me when all is completed."

"Yes, sir." As soon as his captain moved away from him, Nu-kote turned to his men and began to issue orders.

Kirk approached Eliter. "Now, fill me in on what's happening here."

"The council is waiting." He led the two officers out of the room.

After listening to the reports of the council, Kirk decided that it would be unnecessary to involve the *Enterprise* directly in the campaign. True, the ship's phasers could destroy the rebels quickly, but it was impossible to determine how much area the insurgents actually held. There were also large sections of loyal populace interspersed within the same hills.

Kirk didn't care who lived or died on this planet but he knew it wasn't wise to kill loyal citizens unnecessarily. Ancient history had often proven that indiscriminate killing tended to bind people into a cohesive force against what they would then regard as a common enemy. Kirk didn't intend to create martyrs.

Besides, he was proud of his men. His crew had often been labelled as the finest in the fleet. He was confident that they could wipe out these insurgents quickly without the help of the ship's phasers. That the Demetzian government itself had been unable to conquer them didn't bother Kirk; he had little respect for local governments that couldn't protect themselves.

He ordered his security units to assemble within the Xerrian Hills. According to Intelligence, the rebels had a large contingent deployed there.

"Captain."

"What is it, Spock?" Kirk asked as he turned toward his first officer.

"Even for Empire worlds, Demetzia is known for little freedom. The Council here rules with an iron hand. There is no dissent, no redress. It seems a pity to destroy people when their grievances may be just."

"We aren't here to pass judgment on the local government," Kirk replied cautiously. He would never admit that he was ambivalent over the use of the Empire's power in a planet's internal affairs, for to express such misgivings could threaten his own survival. A good soldier followed orders and left the discussions of policies to his superiors. Yet, even so, Kirk was uneasy about this sudden questioning of the Empire's methods by his subordinate. In fact, he'd have been suspicious about its implications if he didn't know that the Vulcan was also an excellent officer, one who recognized the personal profit to be gained in the Empire's policies and who was always ready to carry out orders. Instead, he concentrated on his own reply, knowing that a captain always had to consider carefully what he told a subordinate. "Starfleet sent us here to do a job. Let's get on with it." He shrugged as if to say that further discussion was useless.

"Yes, but if we listened--"

"Such talk is dangerous, Spock. The ruling council of the Empire decides which governments will remain in power. Our job is to see that its decisions are maintained. Fear of retribution is the only thing that keeps these worlds in line; you know that. If there's even a hint that the Empire is soft, we'll have a lot of trouble on our hands."

Spock acknowledged the logic of his statements with a nod.

"Let's join our troops. They're waiting for us." Kirk turned abruptly and left the room, the Vulcan following on his heels.

Concepts he'd thought safely buried began surfacing. Kirk couldn't tell Spock that he secretly respected those willing to stand up against the might of the Empire, that courage against impossible odds was something he admired even if he couldn't allow it to interfere with his duty. He couldn't admit that he'd be sorry to be the instrument of their death even though he also delighted in having the power to blast them out of existence. A captain couldn't trust anyone with that knowledge; it could be used against him.

Whatever conflicting feelings he may have had, Kirk recognized the need for discipline; just as he ruled his ship with an iron hand, he submitted to the authority of those above him. He knew it would be suicide to think otherwise; one's value to the Empire lay in what one could accomplish for it, and everyone was expendable in its eyes. The Empire had been good to him; he had done his job well and he'd been amply rewarded. If he played his cards right he'd go far, and he didn't care what it cost to reach his goals. With that he turned all his attention to the matter at hand.

Kirk shielded his eyes with his palm against the hot sun as he surveyed the area. The rebels had chosen well: the land was rocky with sparse vegetation. The hills were jagged and seemed to jut in all directions for endless miles. Barren, hot and hostile, but easily defended.

He searched for movement but found none.

Spock located the main body of rebels with his tricorder and fed the range and coordinates information to the men. Upon Kirk's signal, the troops opened fire.

In return came the hiss of missiles which impacted all around them, spewing rock and fragments in every direction.

Kirk was so surprised by the sudden turn of events that he didn't even seek cover. Spock flung him against the protruding rock in front of them just as another grenade exploded behind him, sending a shower of debris flying over him.

Kirk scowled at his first officer as he brushed the dust off, but he clung to the protection afforded by the rocks. The heavy bombardment made any other decision impossible.

The roar of noise and the hazy air reflected the intensity of the battle. It was a grim but still confident captain that directed his men. However, when the reports coming in from the various units indicated heavy losses, Kirk bit his lip in rage.

He turned to Spock with his eyes flashing fire. "Goddammit, Spock! What the hell kind of scanning did you do on this planet? Where'd they get these sophisticated weapons? They're cutting our men to ribbons."

Spock shrugged and lifted an eyebrow. "The computer banks contained no data which indicated that anyone of this planet had weapons of this calibre. It is conceivable--" The rest of his statement was drowned out by the whine of another missile. They barely had time to flatten themselves before it exploded.

"Goddammit, that tears it! I'm getting more help. Damn fool council misled us on the number of troops the enemy had and said nothing about the type of weapons available to them. Yet we're supposed to come in here and save their asses." Kirk flung open his communicator with a savage snap and yelled into it. "Kirk to Enterprise."

He had to repeat himself four times before a channel was opened.

Immediately, Kirk knew something was wrong as the unmistakable klaxon of the red alert screeched over the communicator. Over that, he could hear the sounds of battle, as if the *Enterprise* were being buffeted by photon torpedoes. And, barely audible through the confusion and the din, he could hear Scotty yelling orders in the brogue into which he always lapsed when there was serious trouble.

Kirk screamed and swore, but it seemed like an eternity before he caught his engineer's attention. "Goddamnit! What's happening up there?"

"We're under attack by a Klingon vessel, Captain. Popped into space outta nowhere. So far we're holdin' our own, but we're takin' a beatin'. However, we're getting our own licks in--" The rest was lost in a flurry of orders.

"Captain," Spock interrupted, "it is conceivable that the Klingons are behind this insurrection. If that is the case, it would explain the advanced weaponry we find here, as well as the reasons for Mr. Scott's difficulties."

"Later, Spock," Kirk said, dismissing his words with a brush of his hand. The insurgents were momentarily forgotten in his concern for his ship.

"Captain," Spock insisted, the urgency in his voice capturing Kirk's attention. "The Klingons would know that the Empire could not allow this insurrection to go unpunished. Perhaps it was their intention to lay a trap for the expected starship."

Spock voiced the conclusion. "Mr. Scott may find himself facing more than one starship in the immediate future."

"Scotty, listen to me," Kirk yelled. "There may be other Klingon ships on the way. Cut and run if you have to. Save the ship. Contact Starfleet and get some help."

"Captain--" a burst of static interrupted and the communicator went dead.

Kirk adjusted the control hastily and then passed it to Spock. Spock glanced at it and shook his head.

"Well, Mr. Spock, it looks like we're on our own."

"Apparently."

"We'll lick them, Spock," Kirk said confidently. "We've never been beaten yet."

Spock's attention appeared distracted by the readings on his tricorder. "Captain, the insurgents are on the move along that line of ridges." He gestured

toward the hills and Kirk's gaze followed his own. However, nothing could be seen except inhospitable rock formations, broken with scattered patches of vegetation.

"Good. I've got an idea. Get units one and two and take them over that rise. I'll take the rest over this way. Kelly and Dragan can cover us from here with the phaser cannon. We'll squeeze them between us and crush them."

"We will lose many men in the open terrain to that ridge," Spock cautioned.

"Can't be helped. Under the circumstances, it's our only choice."

Spock acknowledged that truth with a slight nod. Crouching low, he worked his way through the heavy fire, gathering the designated men as he went until he was lost from Kirk's sight.

Kirk's group fared poorly, sustaining heavy losses from the constant bombardment. The ground they managed to cover indicated that the rebels were suffering heavy casualties also, but it seemed impossible to beat the insurgents.

Kirk wondered how many rebels were involved. How could they lose so many men and go on fighting? Delusions of freedom always seemed to create fanatics. Damn the council! Had he known, he would've brought down more men and hardware.

Reluctantly, he ordered the inevitable retreat. He regrouped his forces with those straggling in from Spock's direction.

Kirk tried to contact the *Enterprise* but had no luck. Either she was out of range or she'd been destroyed by the Klingons. No, he reasoned, *if the Klingons had defeated her, they'd be down on the planet now, finishing my men off. There's still hope. If only we can hold on...*

As he replaced the communicator on his belt, he wondered where Spock was. He called Nu-kote to him and demanded a report.

Kirk listened patiently for a few minutes and then cut the lieutenant off sharply. "I know what the situation is. Just tell me where that damn Vulcan is."

The nervousness and hedging in his officer's demeanor caused a lump to rise in Kirk's throat. Expecting to hear the worst, he didn't even notice the tightening in his stomach as he spat, "Well?"

"The fire was unbelievably fierce. Commander Spock was among the first to reach the ridge. We could see them dropping like flies up there." The lieutenant flinched

under the angry glare of his captain's eyes.

"Don't tell me you didn't reinforce them!" Kirk barked.

"We tried to reach them, sir. All our attempts were met with heavy fire. We finally gave up."

"So you left him stranded up there. You bastard." That he cared at all surprised Kirk, but at the moment he was too angry to analyze his gut reaction.

"There wasn't much we could do about it. If we had tried to get to him, more men would've been lost. Didn't seem to make much sense." The fear was apparent in the lieutenant's voice; he had never seen that look on his captain's face and it seemed to frighten him.

Kirk snarled, "Since when do you desert your commander under fire? I should have you all shot! My men are better trained than that." He lashed out and grabbed the lieutenant by the shirt. If anything happened to that goddamn Vulcan--

The naked terror in the man's eyes brought Kirk to his senses. He released him with a growl and stalked away.

Nu-kote must think him crazy, worrying about one officer. Why was he so concerned? What difference did it make if the Vulcan lived or died? He had other officers. What difference?

He flipped open his communicator and called for Spock's frequency. When he heard the familiar "Spock here", he was both relieved and faintly pleased, but pushed those emotions aside before he became fully conscious of them. "What's your status?"

"Most of the men are dead, Captain. The others are severely wounded and will probably not survive. The insurgents will be here soon."

"Hang in there, Spock," Kirk said without hesitation. "We'll get you out."

There was a moment of silence before Spock answered. "Captain, that would be unwise. I am wounded and cannot travel. Furthermore, I estimate the enemy will be--"

"I'm coming after you."

Spock's voice registered surprise. "To waste men on my rescue would be highly uncharacteristic, Captain."

"I give the orders here, so shut up! Kirk out." He snapped his communicator shut before Spock could continue his argument. He told himself that Vulcans were needed for their extensive knowledge. All that capability and information under his control gave him an edge no other starship

had--an edge he'd no intention of losing because of a few misguided fanatics.

He found Lt. Nu-kote and gave the necessary orders, unaware in his cold anger that the young man was almost cringing under his fierce gaze.

As the captain made his intentions clear, the lieutenant's blind fear became apparent. To raise objections to the face of one's commander was unheard of, to contradict him was unthinkable, yet to go back there was suicide. The murderous fire that ignited that battlefield was far more immediate and immobilizing than facing an irate captain later.

"Captain," the officer protested, panic obviously loosening his tongue without regard to consequences. "You can't expect the men to go back into that blazing inferno to rescue one seriously wounded officer. He may even be dead by the time we reach him."

"He happens to be my second-in-command...and your superior."

"Yes, but--"

"When did I ask for your opinion, or invite a debate?" he demanded. "I want him out of there. You have your orders, now follow them!"

Kirk's tone served to remind the young officer of how formidable his captain could be and implied that his chances in combat were greater than those in front of him now. It seemed that he had gone as far as he dared for now, and he hastily replied, "Yes, sir," before he fled to carry out Kirk's orders.

Kirk led the men up the ridge under heavy fire. His jaw tightened each time he passed the body of one of his men, lying broken and bloodied on the ground, but he spared each only a cursory look. Nothing could be done for the wounded either until the ship returned.

He soon learned how Spock had been trapped in such an untenable position. They reached a point where each movement was met by intense shelling. Suddenly it seemed as though the gates of hell stretched before them and the men balked, not wanting to move toward what seemed like certain death. While they didn't actually refuse to continue to go forward, threats and cajoling did nothing to allay their panic. They just froze.

Kirk heard a muddled shout and before he could identify the source, his men began a disorganized retreat. Yelling at them did nothing to stop the scramble.

He cursed them with every name he could think of as he inched his way forward.

Actually, he couldn't really blame them. That was the way it was in the Empire--every man for himself, survival over loyalty. He had the best crew in the fleet, but they were used to the might of the Empire at their back. When the odds were against you, you cut your losses and run. Hell, when you attain rank by assassination, what's one more officer here or there? In fact, he felt like a damn fool for crawling along on his stomach like this. Could he blame his men for thinking him mad?

If he had to explain what motivated him to attempt rescue, he couldn't--except that the gut reaction he'd experienced earlier had been so strong he could've killed them all in his fury. He recognized that part of the feeling was fear--but fear of what? It didn't make sense.

For that matter, risking his life didn't make sense. Maybe he had lost his mind, but he owed the Vulcan something. How many times had Spock risked his own life for him? Why he ever did, mystified Kirk. Spock could've been captain by now, but perhaps that was the answer. It wasn't natural. But who knew what was natural to Vulcans when they hid behind their masks of logic?

Nevertheless, it was good to have someone like that behind him--someone he could trust not to stab him in the back. Perhaps that was why he wanted to save the Vulcan: he didn't have to worry about having a first officer who'd be jockeying for command. At least it was a reason with which he could easily live.

Kirk glanced up at the sky. Where was the *Enterprise* when he needed her?

He finally located Spock in a small pocket along a section gutted by the bombardment.

Kirk quickly surveyed the area between them, noting where the sparse vegetation offered him some cover. He pressed his lips into a thin line, crouched low, and dashed for safety. He dove into the vegetation with the whine of phaser fire in his ears and the scattering of rock under his feet.

As Kirk scrambled across the remaining ground that separated them, Spock opened his eyes. Recognition and surprise flickered across the dulled pupils. "You should not have come, Captain. Most illogical to risk yourself."

Kirk perceived how weak the Vulcan was--not surprising since his shirt and trousers were soaked with green blood. "You didn't think I wouldn't, did you?" he muttered as he inspected the ugly wounds. The Vulcan wasn't a pretty sight; both his chest and thigh were torn open and bleeding freely. And from the look of his singed

shoulder, those weren't Spock's only problems. Without his Vulcan stamina, Spock would no longer be alive.

Spock's voice was only a pained whisper, but he sought to communicate. "I did not...expect you, Captain.... I always thought...you had more sense than this."

"That's no way to greet a rescuer," Kirk grinned grimly. "It wasn't easy to get here."

Spock's eyes fixed on his captain's and he whispered weakly, "Why did you come?" When Kirk didn't answer, Spock drew on some inner reserve to protest, "Compassion has never been one of your strong points. I have seen you sentence men to die without hesitation. You have killed men with your own hands. What is one more dead officer?" Each word was an enunciation of distress.

Uncomfortable, Kirk started to scan their surroundings, as if assessing their position. He'd need the Vulcan's cooperation to get them both out of this. "Save your strength for escape, Spock."

"One officer or many, Captain--what difference does it make?"

"What does it matter why I'm here? I'm here. Let's concentrate on getting you out of here and forget about stupid questions."

Kirk placed a hand on Spock's elbow, but Spock shook it off. "The enemy will be here soon. I have tracked their movements with the tricorder. If you go now, Captain, you have a chance to escape before they discover you."

"I'm not leaving without you," Kirk said with a ring of authority, hoping to end the Vulcan's resistance. However, Kirk could still see the stubbornness in the dark eyes so, reluctantly, he offered, "If you really need some kind of reason, let's just say I'm evening the score."

Spock stared at him in silence for a long moment and Kirk hoped the Vulcan had given up. "I suggest we both get started."

Spock shook his head obstinately and gathered the necessary strength to object. "I have lost too much blood to survive in this condition. I cannot move by myself. My presence will hamper your escape." Kirk's expression hardened and Spock added, "If you insist on taking me back with you, neither of us will survive. There is no logic in both of us dying. Please leave now."

"Spock, are we going to sit here arguing until the insurgents find us? Or are you going to help me get out of here?"

Spock appeared to recognize the finality behind those words, and to know that further protest was useless. He closed his eyes without answering.

Kirk reached out a hand to help support Spock against his own body. He half-dragged the Vulcan and half-carried him as together they crawled back toward the troops. Spock tried to help as much as he could, but his pain appeared intense and his consciousness faded in and out.

Because of the need to hurry, it was impossible to watch closely where they crawled; sharp stones tore their clothing and scraped their skin. The explosions that continued to send debris showering over them didn't help their progress any as they were forced to duck and protect themselves as much as possible from each blast. One hit so close that dust temporarily blinded them and they choked against the grit in their mouths.

Kirk suddenly heard the whine of phasers and saw flashes of light around him. A new chaos claimed the battlefield as whole segments of the hills disintegrated under the force of the blasts. The *Enterprise* had returned.

Kirk's shout of joy was drowned by a deafening crash as the ground erupted into hurling rocks and rubble. He instinctively flattened himself against the ground and covered his head with his arms.

He cried out in pain as something tore into his back.

"Captain," Spock shouted and reached out to grab him.

Kirk coughed to clear his throat and muttered, "I'm all right." He shrugged off the Vulcan's support and flexed his muscles gingerly.

Rising up on his elbows, Kirk looked around for cover. "Our ship is back, Spock. But we've got to get away from open ground." He rolled over to look at the Vulcan. His smile faded. Spock's face was tightly drawn and very pale. His lips were pressed tightly together and lacked any color.

Kirk reached for Spock's arm and motioned in the direction of a darkened area. "Looks like some kind of trench there. Let's try for that."

Spock tried to push Kirk away but lacked the strength to do so. "Go, Captain. Alone you stand a chance of making it."

"Spock--"

Spock gazed into Kirk's weary eyes. "Why do you insist when the situation

is relatively hopeless? To be personally concerned with the life of one officer is a breach of--"

"Who says I'm rescuing you out of personal concern," Kirk cut in, his irritation increasing with Spock's constant resistance. "Don't consider yourself that important."

Conscious of the need for speed, Kirk tugged at Spock's arm. Words tumbled out rapidly in fear and impatience. "Damn you! I've got to have a first officer-- whether it's you or someone else. You don't want the captaincy so I can trust you. I'd be a damn fool to let something happen to you. I might get some young hotshot, eager to prove he can out-captain the captain. I don't want to walk through the corridors, worrying about my back and wondering when he'd try it. Does that satisfy you?"

There was no answer and Kirk wasn't sure that Spock believed him. However, he did sense an easing of resistance in the Vulcan and felt relieved. He muttered under his breath, "Besides, you wouldn't let that stop you if the situation were reversed, would you?" He caught the quizzical glance and wished that he hadn't said that so loud--he didn't mean for Spock to hear him.

To cover the slip, he started to drag the Vulcan toward the crevice. He shoved him in first and then rolled in next to him. Panting from the exertion, Kirk barely had the strength to check on Spock's condition.

"Just sit tight," he ordered. "You die on me now and I'll have your head for my trouble." He didn't even notice the Vulcan's raised eyebrow as he continued, "All we have to do now is wait out the battle and then Scotty can beam us on home." Kirk realized then that he was really too exhausted to do anything else. His back felt on fire and his shoulders were stiffening.

Damn these rebels! When I get back to the Enterprise, I'll make them pay for this! There won't be enough left of them to bury. I'll see to that!

Pain made him think less kindly on the man lying beside him, and he began to resent the trouble Spock had caused him. Goddammit, why hadn't he listened to the Vulcan and left him? In fact, why had he worried about him in the first place? No one was worth risking his own neck for... crawling through the dirt...eating dust... ducking for his life.... No one was worth the damn agony in his back or the wet sticky sensation of his own blood around him... he didn't need anyone...he had come this far without anyone...he needed no help to get where he wanted...he'd been a fool for nothing...Spock was just as likely as anyone else to turn against him tomorrow...best to

trust no one and you get no surprises...and yet...

Kirk recalled the time he had been trapped on Emortia, his landing party captured and thrown in a damp, dark dungeon. He hadn't known that the *Enterprise* had been attacked also, that Spock had been seriously injured in the ensuing battle, that the only thing that saved the Vulcan from the ambition of the man next in line was his loyal group of operatives, or that the officer in charge had decided his captain was expendable and had ordered the *Enterprise* away. He had only known that he'd waited and waited for rescue until there was no denying that the *Enterprise* had abandoned him. His anger at his betrayal had matched the brutality he had been forced to endure.

He'd never understood why Spock had returned for him but that hadn't stopped him from putting such loyalty to good use. Spock had been instrumental in his conquest of the Bremans, had shown him how to gain the cooperation of the mind creatures on Theta Six and use them as a lever against his enemies in the Admiralty, had backed him up when the short and quick little spy mission into Leada had turned into messy business. In fact, whenever he'd needed support, the Vulcan hadn't failed him. It had to count for something.

Weary and spent, he grudgingly admitted aloud, "You've served me well, Spock. We've been a good team, you and I. Our missions together have been successful and I..." He caught himself and looked guiltily at the Vulcan. He was relieved to see that Spock was unconscious.

His mind soon drifted into a semi-haze of battle sounds.

Eventually, things turned quiet enough to contact the ship.

As Kirk waited to dematerialize, he laid his hand briefly on Spock's slack shoulder to assure himself the unconscious Vulcan was still alive. He staggered to his feet just as the beam caught him.

Captain's log, supplemental.

We have finally rounded up the last of the insurgents and have executed them in the public square in full view of the citizenry as a lesson to them. However, they allowed the rebellion to fester in their midst without actively stopping it, until the intervention of a starship became necessary. For that reason, I've decided that a more widespread lesson is appropriate. I've instructed Mr. Sulu to program a wide-scatter phaser barrage over the countryside in which we encountered the

rebels. Much of this landscape was destroyed in the previous engagement, but I made it clear to Sulu that I wanted nothing left alive or standing in that area as a permanent reminder of what rebellion against the Empire brings. Having done so, I've ordered the *Enterprise* to resume course for the next assignment. In view of the Klingon intervention encountered on Demetzia, Starfleet feels it's necessary to secure the Halkan dilithium mines.


"Come," Kirk called in answer to the buzz at the door, punching the switch to the recorder simultaneously. He was surprised when Spock entered; he hadn't expected the Vulcan to be released from sickbay this soon. When Kirk had threatened McCoy into discharging him, Spock hadn't looked in any condition to return to duty.

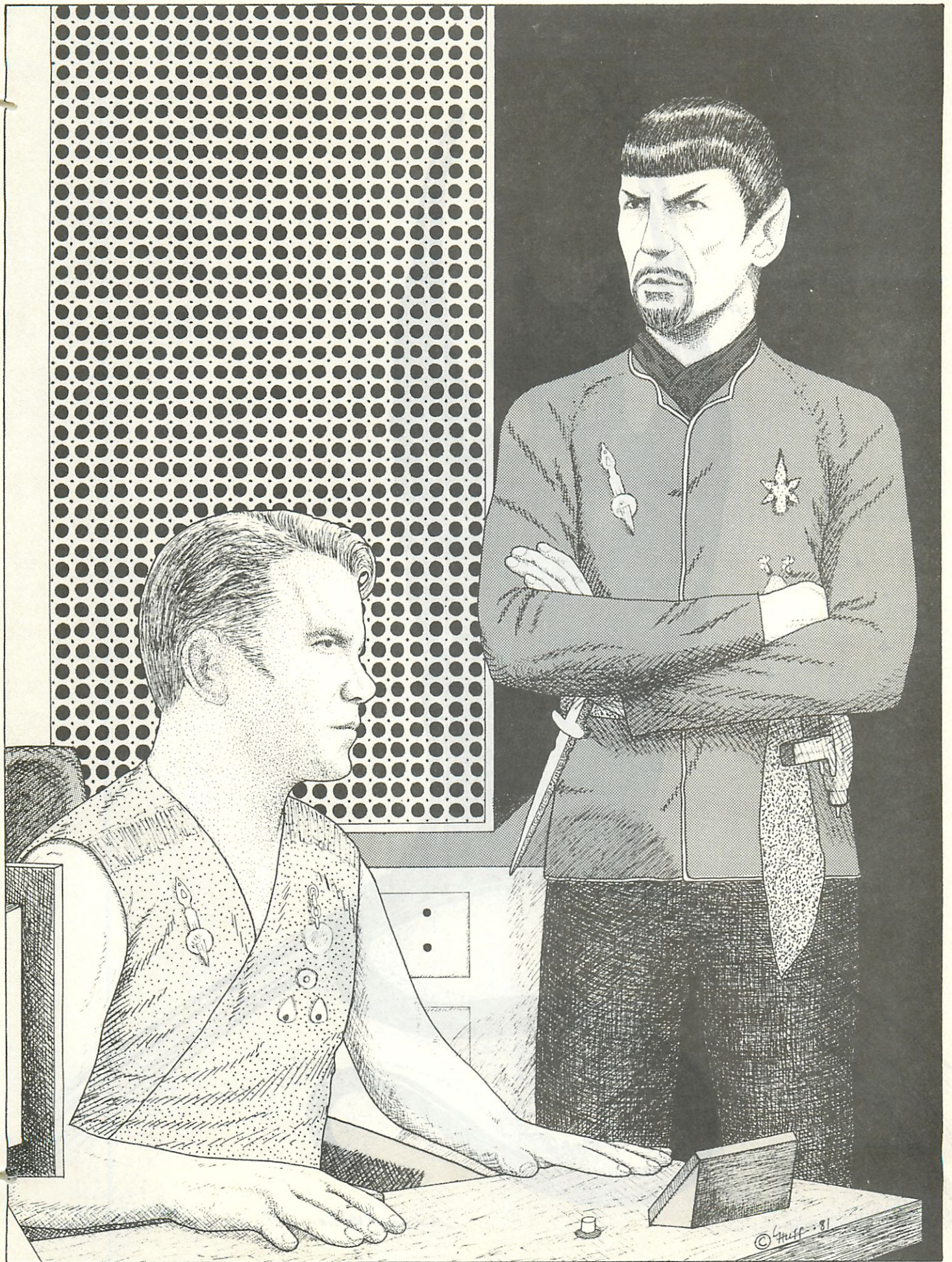
"Good, you're back on your feet, Mr. Spock," he said quickly, nervous that there'd be some reminder of what had transpired on Demetzia. "Our next assignment's to deal with the Halkans and I want a full rundown on their planet--resources, weaponry, the works. I want to know what I'm up against before we arrive." He paused for Spock's acknowledgement and then continued, "And this time, Mr. Spock, I want no surprises. Is that clear?"

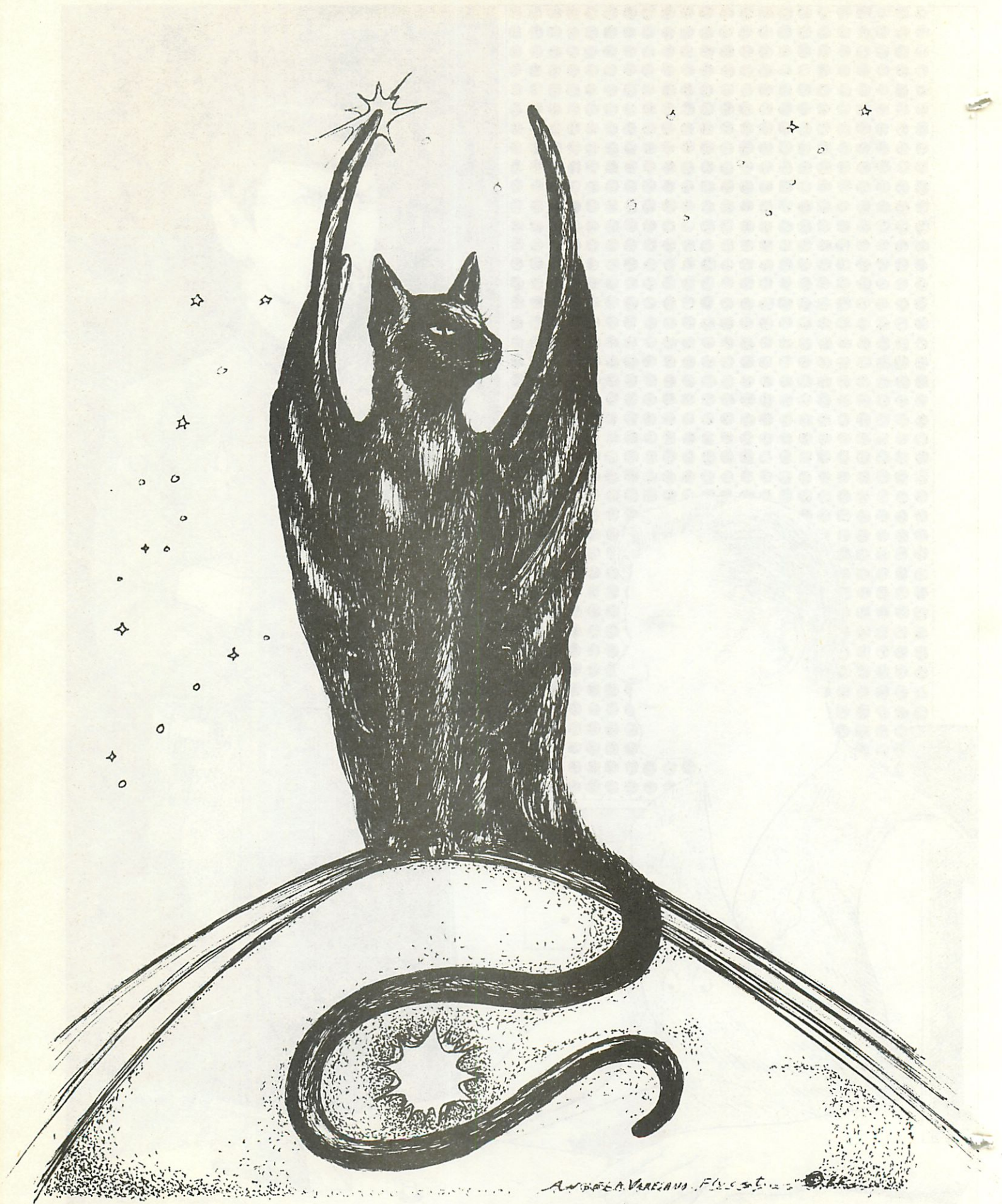
Spock stiffened perceptibly at the implication in Kirk's hardened tone was that he was somehow at fault for the resistance they'd met on Demetzia. There was a limit to what could be learned from sensor scans but Spock chose not to remind Kirk of that. Instead, he replied, "Yes, Captain."

"Good. Let me know when you have anything," Kirk said in dismissal as he turned his attention back to the reports on his desk. He glanced up when he became aware that Spock had made no attempt to leave. "Something I can do for you?"

The hazel eyes were devoid of expression. Gone was the concern that had shadowed them so recently on Demetzia. Kirk was once again the familiar stranger who kept himself apart from everyone, even his small group of trusted and well-paid mercenaries. Spock raised a brow consideringly and Kirk was uneasily aware that here, if anywhere, was a being capable of seeing through his actions and his attitudes. But when the Vulcan spoke, it related only to the matter at hand.

"No, Captain. I will start on this immediately." He turned and left without looking back. Kirk stared intently after him, the confused wish to have someone to turn to warring with the fear of vulnerability in his eyes. 





ANGELA VAREZANI - Firenze - 1980

FOUR WINGS

When we sat by the hearth
And the fire's glow
Illumined our tales in the dark,
Cats sought with us
As we learned to fly
With the eyes of our mind as wings.

With our mind as wings
We caught the stars;
The Gods smiled to see Their kin.
The Cats with their eyes
Revealed the moon
And a destiny to win.

To win the dark
A stalker of white
With fire at its heart we sent
On a trackless road
Only mapped by mind
And the scent of an alien Earth.

To an alien earth
We make our path
In the chill at the start of dawn,
With the spaceport towers
Pushing back the night
Over the flats where the Flycats swarm.

--Angela-marie Varesano

Reflection

KAREN OSMAN

#1: SONG

(Note: The following was found scratched on a piece of metal floating in the ruins of the Death Star. From our analysis, the material seems to be part of a wall from the head near where the TIE-fighter pilots were quartered.)

We march where we are ordered, and we fight when we are told.
Our beer is warm, our bunks are hard, our coffee's always cold.
We're a sorry bunch o' soldiers, and our fame is really small--
'Cause the com was 'out of order' when we answered Duty's call.

We're "wedded to the Service"--you've heard that one, I'll lay bets--
(And we know she loves us, 'cause she screws us every chance she gets)
The girls, we love and leave 'em, 'though our technique's sort of brash,
And when loving arms enfold us, they've a hand held out for cash.

Commander fires off memoes, and his pen's beyond compare,
And Tarkin's famous for the way he flies a swivel chair.
You're Up; you think you've ditched the Brass and you can blow the Joint--
Then Wing shouts, "Look Out--Vader!" and--the bastard's flying point!

There's some that fight by seat-of-pants, and some that fight by ear,
But we've got one whose style's unique, and known both far and near:
When Vader's in a fire-fight, well, you know he's sure to win:
He doesn't fly the fighter, boys, the fighter plugs him in.

They say that he's got magic powers, more than mortal man.
Well, I heard tell this story's true, believe it if you can:
Walked upstairs at Madame Rosie's; scanned the readout on his dials--
Next morning fifty girls came down--and all o' them wore smiles!

I was canted as a soldier, and I'll soldier 'til I die.
I'll take a TIE to hell and back--don't ever ask me why.
I'm a no-'count fighter jockey, yeah, but buddy, I've got CLASS,
'Cause I'm flying Vader's squadron: And the rest can _____!

#2: "The men are loyal, Sir; morale is high."--
My spies (the few I trust) have told me this:
"They love you, Sir." I send them out to die
And they go willingly. "They love you, Sir."

I am a Jedi; my trade is to die,
If necessary, for the common good.
And they are soldiers; it is their trade, too.
But still, there is in me a bitterness
That they must go like cattle to a doom
They do not choose, and cannot understand,
Because they're clones--because they were made clones.

Can any of us chose where we are born?
My fathers were the Dark Lords of the Sith:
A name, a title, and a heritage
'fore the Republic was first federate--
Before the Empire even was a dream.
A thousand years they ruled, and tried to serve
Their subject peoples.

That trust I hold still.
What do I care for that fool, Palpatine,
Or his praetorian guard, his synchophants?
He thinks he rules because he holds a throne.
Bled by his court, baffled by bureaucrats,
Muffled from every truth by those he buys:
He does not know, as I have had to know
From birth: To rule is not to shout commands.

But if the Empire falls? We lose it all.

I wish that Obi Wan had understood.
But he was always one to see the parts,
The single justice or injustice done:
A wild disorder of contending goods.
And how, among them, shall the Good prevail
That is the good for all of men alike,
Unless a wiser Will can make it real.
Without that Order, Freedom soon must die.
Is anarchy not multi-tyranny?
(That horde of kinglets breeding petty wars?)
Yes, Palpatine is better than that curse,
'though I dispise him.



I must see the whole.
And so, I send them out to spend their lives.
They go because they are my loyal men.
(They go because we serve a greater good.)
I fly with them; I ask no sacrifice
I will not give.

I keep the Jedi vow.
The People live. And if we die? We die.

DARTH VADER AT THE VIEWSCREEN
(STAR WARS, P. 129)

REQUEST DENIED...

Barbara Wenk

"Sir--"

The voice was soft, gentle, but with underlying firmness. Admiral Kirk, now captaining the *Enterprise* once more, swiveled the command chair. "Yes, lieutenant?"

The lieutenant, a young man with a childish round face at odd variance with that assured voice, faced him steadily. "Admiral Kirk, as ranking officer in security, I hereby place you under arrest."

"You what?" Even as Kirk spoke, the officers that had followed the lieutenant onto the bridge stepped forward, phasers covering every senior officer on the bridge. Kirk rose to his feet. "This is mutiny, mister!"

"No, sir. This is suppression of a mutiny. Yours." The lieutenant's voice held regret, but his gaze did not waver. "You are in violation of a direct order from Starfleet to return to base, Admiral. You've hijacked this ship, with the connivance of your senior officers."

"Now see here, lieutenant--" Kirk began furiously.

The lieutenant raised his hand, snapped his fingers. Two security guards

stepped toward Kirk. "I'm sorry sir. But don't try any of the heroics you're so famous for. Or you, sir," he added, as Spock took an involuntary step forward.

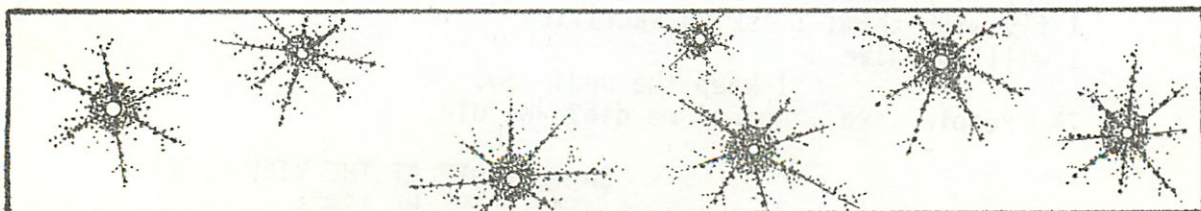
Kirk and Spock exchanged a glance. Kirk shook his head very slightly.

The lieutenant lost none of his alertness. "I'm sorry, Admiral," he repeated. "I really am. I hate to have to be the one to do this to James Kirk. But there are several hundred people on this ship who don't want to have their lives ruined for your obsession with this ship."

The lieutenant snapped his fingers again. "And I'm well aware of your reputation--and your crew's--for ingenious escapes. So..."

There was a soft humming as the security guards fired. Kirk, Spock, Uhura, and the others crumpled under the stunning rays.

Stepping to the command chair, the lieutenant pressed a button. "Captain's log. Lieutenant Robert Hunter, assuming temporary command. Having secured the ship from the--mutineers--I have ordered them all kept in sickbay, under sedation until we return to Starbase..."



The Sound of Distant Laughter

Marcia Brin

Princess Leia Organa, President of the New Republic, was tired. So very tired. She leaned back in the plush chair and rubbed her eyes wearily. It had been like this for several months. Nothing physical, she knew that. She wasn't old to begin with--her fiftieth birthday was still a month away--and a recent check-up had found her in the best of health.

No, the trouble rested elsewhere. The emptiness, the loss, the pain that she had lived with for so long, but which she had kept locked in a private area of her life, had suddenly broken loose. Her work, once so important, no longer seemed to matter. Nothing did.

The pain. It had started twenty-five years ago, the night Luke and Chewie and Lando Calrissian--~~damn him~~--had brought the *Falcon*, and Han, home. She had stood in the landing bay of the rebel base, surrounded by the bustle of life, and all she had seen was death. Death...in the shape of a still, lifeless figure held so gently in Chewie's arms. Her world had narrowed to that unmoving form. Luke's words had been lost in her silent cry of anguish, but they echoed in her mind later. "We were too late."

Too late. It had all been too late. Why had they been so foolish? Hiding from their feelings until it was...too late. What little time they had had together had been thrown away.

And that had hurt worst of all. It wasn't that she had no memories of him; in truth, his images were as sharp as if twenty-five years had not passed: the sound of his laughter, the flash of his eyes, the grace of his movements. But perhaps the sense of loss would not have been so great had there been a sharing between them she could have carried with her through the years.

Even her dreams had not been free of the torment. She would find herself wandering in a vast emptiness, cold and alone, while a voice she recognized as hers wept, crying the same thing over and over: "Too late. Too late."

Yet, the last few months, everything had turned upside down. Suddenly, her ancient grief dominated her waking moments and her work no longer provided solace. Maybe it was her body's way of telling her that it was tired, that after almost thirty years of rebellion and rebuilding it wanted a rest, that she had done her part--and done it brilliantly--and now it was time to pass the torch.

Strangely, though, her dreams now were good. The same dream, again and again. She could never remember what it was, but she recognized it as she slept. All she knew was that she woke feeling happy. She began to look forward to the nights, and dread the days.

There was something else, too, something she had been trying to avoid facing. She was...imagining things. *No! Just...tired*, she thought defensively. No. She hadn't been tired at all. It had started with a feeling of being watched. Once or twice, she had wakened with the fleeting impression that someone was in her room. Then, last night... She had been on the verge of leaving her office. The room was mostly in darkness, the only light coming in through the opened doorway. She had paused to glance around the office, a last minute check, when her eyes caught the mirror opposite the doorway-- She froze.

A figure stood silhouetted against the light. A man's figure, tall and lean, with the outline of a blaster on his right hip. Someone she had known, a stance she recognized at once. Half-afraid, half-joyous, she had turned around.

The doorway was empty.

And today she was so very, very tired. It was, indeed, time to go, when the past was more real and more important than the present. Perhaps if she had been different, had been able to let the wound heal and find someone to fill the gap... But she had learned, to her surprise, that she was one of that rare breed that loved once with a devotion even death could not break. Friends--good, dearly-loved friends--she had had, Luke and Chewie on the top of the list. But that special love, that she had buried with Han. Wherever he had gone, he had not traveled that long path alone.

Han! Something inside cried out.
Han! Why did you leave me behind?

"There was no choice, babe," came the quiet reply from the darkened anteroom that opened into her office.

For a moment, the galaxy froze, leaving an overwhelming silence broken only by the pounding of her heart and the harshness of her breathing. She stared across her office into the anteroom, but could not pierce the blackness.

"Han?" she asked uncertainly.

A laugh--oh, gods, how beautiful!--echoed in the chamber. "Who else would be skulking in your room, sweetheart? Well, are you going to sit there forever, or come with me?"

She began to laugh, laugh as she had not done in twenty-five years and, without a backward glance or a moment's hesitation, left her office for the last time.

* * *

It was quiet now. He was alone with his grief. They had gone, finally, the government officials, the security officers, the press, the doctors, the friends. Luke knew they were only doing their jobs--or expressing their sorrow--but, gods, he didn't care. For the first time, he just didn't give a damn about the Republic. It would survive; even now, the reins of power were being transferred.

Right now, as he stood by the window behind Leia's desk and stared out into the night, all he knew was his loss. He had come over to talk with her; her

increasing weariness with her life had worried him. After debating the issue with himself, he had at last decided to broach the subject, to remind her that friends were for sharing, that she could lean on him as he had leaned on her in the past.

But he had been too late, as he had been too late twenty-five years ago. Ah, Leia, why couldn't you have waited? Did I have to lose the chance to say good-bye to you, too?

Suddenly, he felt old. He ran one hand over the back of her chair; she had been sitting in it, so still, when he arrived. He had known she had been gone for some time. Even with his command of the Force, he had been unable to detect any of her aura, and hers had been a strong presence.

It was the expression on her face that had stayed with him. He had not seen that joyousness in her since Han had been lost. It was as if she had gone, happily, to something, something she had welcomed; as if she had finally found the peace that had eluded her in life.

Brushing at the tears that coursed down his cheeks, he turned and stared blindly at her desk--then frowned in surprise. Moonlight streaming through the window behind him had illuminated a piece of paper under a paperweight. Strange. Security had cleaned out the desk, he had watched them. He was positive it hadn't been there before, but then how--?

He held it up to the light and found himself scanning it in stunned disbelief.

"Kid," it read, "forget 'good-byes'. Tell that oversized fuzzball that we'll be waiting for you."

It wasn't sighed; it didn't have to be. Luke knew that bold handwriting, knew it though he had not seen it in a quarter of a century. Though the tears still glistened in the moonlight, he felt a lightness well up inside him.

Looking out the window again at the shimmering stars, he whispered, "Luck, you two. We won't be long."

And from beyond the edge of time and space, came a sudden rush of warmth and the distant sound of laughter.



STORY CONTEST

"No WAY!" said Han, glaring at Leia and Luke.

"But--"

"No motherin' WAY!" He emphasized this by pointing a finger at her. "Ya got that, Your Worshipfulness? No. N-O."

Leia's large brown eyes looked round and tragic, her mouth forlorn. "But Han, you're the only one who has even a chance to--"

"Aw, no you don't," said Han disgustedly. "You ain't gonna sucker this smuggler into one of your high-flying schemes this time, Princess, so cut the calamity-bit. Not even for you do I masquerade as a monk."

"Aw, come on, Han," said Luke, putting a supportive arm around Leia's shoulders. "We're not even asking you to take final vows or anything."

Han rounded on Luke. "You watch your mouth, kid!" The Corellian's voice was fierce, and Luke blinked, looking taken aback. "And that goes for you, too, little girl," Han went on, scowling impartially at both princess and fledgling Jedi. "Never heard such a bunch of sacriligious nonsense in my life, an' the pair of you oughta be ashamed of yourselves."

There was a stunned silence as Luke and Leia stared at Han in wide-eyed amazement.

Han straightened and snorted. "You aren't, but you sure as hell oughta be!" With that, he turned and stalked off, leaving Luke and Leia standing gazing after him.

After a moment, Luke closed his mouth and shook his head. "What got into him?"

"I don't know," said Leia slowly.

"I've never heard him sound like that before."

They exchanged a puzzled glance. "I guess we don't know everything about Captain Solo yet," Leia added in a subdued voice.

"Yeah," said Luke. "Yeah, I guess maybe you're right."

Leia's shoulders took on a dispirited slump under Luke's arm. "Now how are we going to get that? I was sure Han--he's the perfect person for it, damn him anyway!"

After a second's hesitation, Luke hugged her shoulders, then quickly removed his arm. "Look, I'll talk to him. I'm sure he'll do it. We just didn't--didn't approach it the right way." Luke grinned encouragingly. "How much money've we got?"

Leia smiled back. "Not much. Not after--well, talking pays no toll. Are you really willing to try talking him into it, Luke?"

"Sure," said Luke bracingly. "Everything'll be fine, Leia, you'll see."

* * *

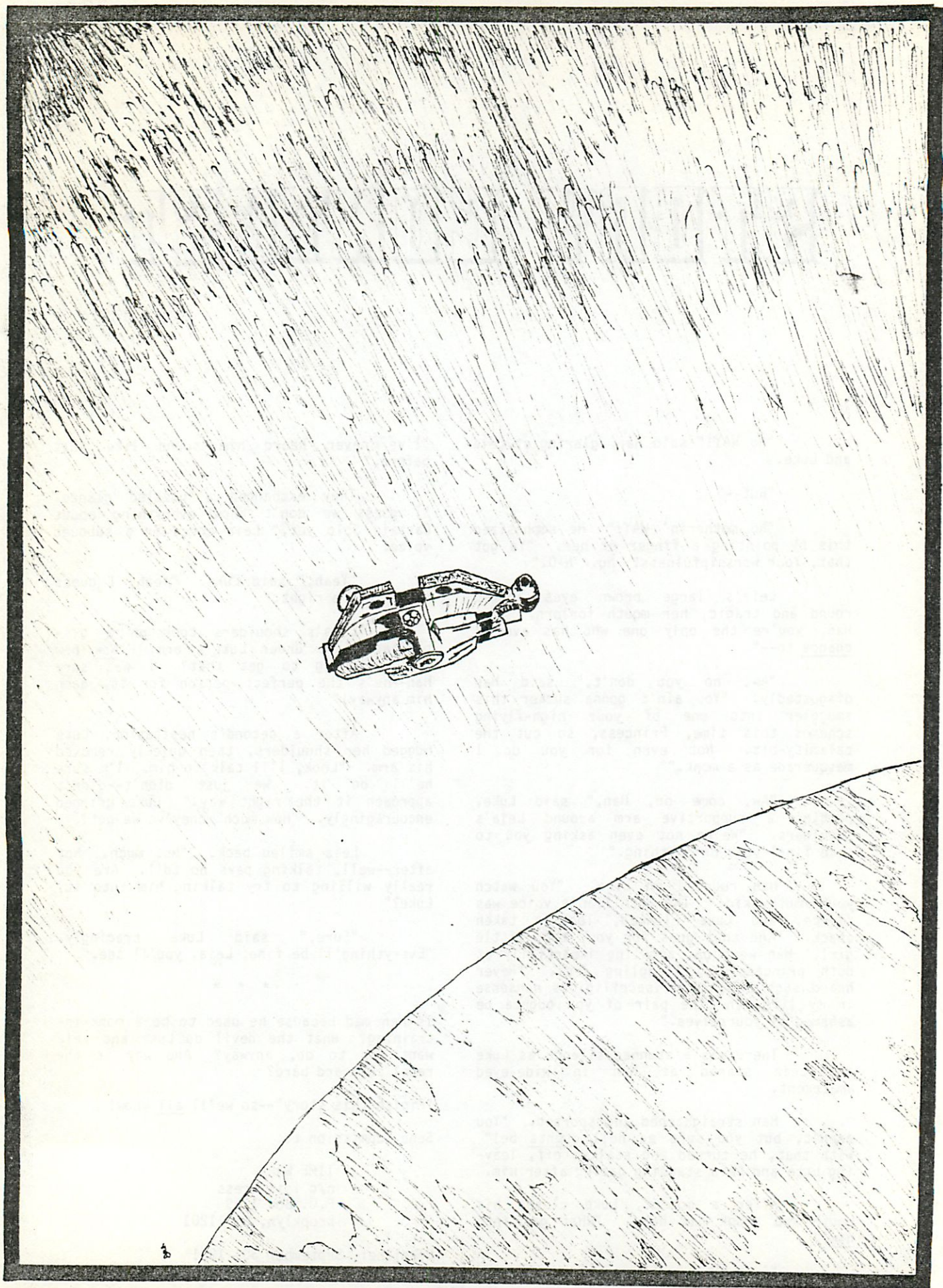
Is Han mad because he used to be a monk-in-training? What the devil do Luke and Leia want Han to do, anyway? And why is the rebel cupboard bare?

"Finish this story"--so we'll all know!

Send submission to:

TIME WARP
c/o Isis Press
P.O. Box 1159
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Deadline: September 30, 1981



special modifications

JANI HICKS

(A TALE OF THE CONTRAVERSE)

"It's the *Falcon*! Mother God of Carco, it's the *Falcon*!" Sharna Kallani ripped her headset off and shouted over her shoulder into the general din that had erupted from her statement: "General Rieekan, it's them! The beacon has reported their signal; they're on their way to 421 decimal 77--the old rendezvous!"

Rieekan strode over to the console where Kallani had replaced her headset and was coding a scrambled message to travel over subspace through the code-activated repeater that had been placed at the rendezvous when the Rebel fleet had departed after the rout on Hoth. They were resettled now, on a world called T'filla, and growing stronger by the day. Scattering of the forces into several satellite bases, commanded from the one on T'filla, had made detection by Imperials more difficult; and Vader and his subordinates had seem particularly distracted since the battle over the ice world.

The relayed message was answered by the *Falcon* almost immediately. "This is Councillor Organa. We will be at the rendezvous point at 2100 hours standard tomorrow. The *Falcon* needs extensive repairs, and we have a casualty. Scramble a medical team to meet us." The transmitter was switched off.

Kallani glanced up at the General. "What can we do? They don't know where we are, and the cruiser *Alliance* is days away from where they are, even by hyperdrive."

The dark-haired man thought for a second. "Fuel a short-range transport, small, but with heavy hyperspace capability."

Sharna looked at Vandra Rieekan

with a question in her eyes.

"Go ahead," he said, "take the *Gizelle*. She's spaceworthy."

Kallani ran to her old freighter without stopping at her quarters. It hadn't been so long since she'd had the old girl out that there wouldn't be supplies enough for the food synthesizer and clothing-mech aboard for a few days, the little while she'd be gone...

The preflights were run for her by the time she got there; the General had called ahead that she was taking her old freighter. She had always boasted to Han that the *Gizelle* could take the *Falcon* in a race; it looked like she was about to find out.

Coordinates set in the navcomp, she lifted out of T'filla and headed for... what? All she knew was that the Princess was in working order, or at least healthy enough to talk, and that there was sufficient personnel to fly the bird--Han's bird--but who was hurt? Where was Luke? Had he finally made rendezvous with the others? How had he found them? Where in the name of the Mother God had he gone?

She set the alarms and preprogrammed the astrogators, then headed aft. *Get some rest, lady. You'll find out soon enough.*

Aboard the *Falcon* Lando glanced quizzically at Leia when she shut off communication so abruptly. "Why not tell them who's hurt and how? They'll need specialized equipment, tech droids,

drugs...."

The Wookiee almost deafened them with his answer.

"Oh, yeah; they would ask about him then." Calrissian returned his attention to the freighter that was now in his care, not seeing the fleeting look on the Princess' face.

And what would we tell them?

The alarms went off aboard the *Gizelle* just as Kallani was waking up from a troubled sleep. She had been reaching into darkness, cold and feeling numb. She knew she was alive--nothing more. It was as if she were shrouded in something--buried, like the old masters in the Enclosure had been when she was a child. She shook herself awake and went forward.

The sublight engines cut in, and she half expected to see the familiar shape of the *Millennium Falcon* waiting for her. Instead she found empty space, the usually-comforting sight of a blank starfield: at least there were no Imperials to deal with, no TIEs, no cruisers, no destroyers...

A centipart later it came into normal space like a solidifying hologram: the battered old freighter that Kallani loved almost as much as she loved her own. And almost as much as she had loved someone else, once, before he had disappeared over an ice world those months ago....

Her thoughts were broken by Calrissian's voice. "This is the freighter *NightFlight*. We are carrying wounded and re--"

Kallani cut him off; the voice sounded familiar, but... "The hell it is. What you are, my friend, is the junk bucket *Millennium Falcon*; now where the hell is Han?"

Leia's voice came over the comlink. "Who's this?"

"Princess? This is Sharna Kallani. General Rieekan sent me to lead you to the cruiser *Alliance*, since it's closer than the base and we didn't know how seriously wounded you... By the way, who's hurt? What's going on over there, anyway?"

"Don't worry about the wounded; that's under control for now. Just give us the coordinates for the *Alliance* and take that-- that heap of yours back to whatever base it crawled out of." The Princess knew about the running joke Han and Kallani had about their freighters--neither one looked like it could get out of atmosphere, let alone into hyperspace, but both could fly rings around anything the Impies had to

offer.

Kallani smiled. "With all due respect, your Ladyship, I'm flying escort. Rieekan's orders." Well, they would have been if he'd known... "So let me talk to Han." Sharna was feeling better than she had since Hoth...if it hadn't been for the haunting suffocation of the night before.

"He's--uh--indisposed. Just give us the coordinates and when we get to the cruiser we'll all have a long talk."

"Right. After fifty parts of debriefing and conferences and gods know what else. Oh, well, he'll be out of the head by the time we make the cruiser and then I can at least say 'hi'." Kallani punched up the current position of the cruiser. "Ready to transmit coordinates."

The *Gizelle* and the *Falcon* spun into hyperspace together.

Kallani knew the *Alliance*, neither Lando or Chewie did--it had been a recent rebel acquisition, purchased with some of the newly-freed-and-laundered liquidated offworld funds of Alderaan's holdings. Some of these holdings had been seized by the Empire, but Bail Organa had been no fool, and many of them were hidden under false ownership piled upon false ownership, so that only his heirs and the Alliance Council could untangle the snarl. The cruiser was a beautiful great hulking beast, with landing pads on either side of her imposing hull. The *Gizelle* was docked and secured before Chewie had unraveled the landing patterns on the opposite side to get the *Falcon* berthed.

As the landing pad receded into the foredecks of the cruiser, bearing the battered *Falcon*, Kallani waited, pacing back and forth. The head of the medical team waiting for the unknown casualty--Ben Kenobi's newly-recruited daughter, a full-fledged Jedi in her own right who had spent twenty years hiding from the Empire and had given up her only son so that he would not be condemned to suffer for her "crimes"--waited with her. The older woman placed a hand on the young pilot's shoulder. "Patience, Sharna, fidgeting will not bring him out any sooner."

Kallani was about to retort, tartly, when the ramp from the old freighter extended into the bay and a battered and bruised Luke Skywalker appeared. Marrie Kenobi and the medical droids scurried over to him, examining his traumatic amputation as they sped him off to the sick bay.

Kallani's hopes were soaring. If Luke was the casualty, then Han must have been in the head, or asleep, or SOME-THING.... She waited.

Councillor Leia Organa disembarked to be surrounded and carried off by thirteen metric tons of brass and scrambled eggs--the rest of the Council (who seemed to have played this scene before), several of her friends, and other military officers who wanted to know what had befallen their royal charge in the preceding eight months. She was followed by a somewhat chagrined-looking Lando Calrissian who seemed to be in full realization that he had committed himself beyond his capacity to extricate--considerable though that capacity had proved to be in the past.

Kallani had met Lando twice, long ago, when she was still running shipments of quasi-legal and just-plain-illegal cargos from port to port; that was how she had met Han, as well. Picked Solo up in a spaceport bar, she had; well, she wasn't the first or the last to do that, but they had remained friends and lovers for almost four years, not claiming exclusive rights to either in the other's realm. Sharna walked up to Lando and exchanged vague pleasantries; he had known nothing of her and Han. But the Wookiee....

Chewie disembarked and Kallani looked past him to the freighter. He started to speak, but she rushed past and on board the *Falcon*.

"Han? Han?" Her voice got louder, more demanding and frantic, with each repetition. She toured the cabins--his had not been slept in for some time and looked just-cleaned. She ran through the holds--all were empty since the freighter had been stripped for evacuation from Hoth, with all essential equipment moved into transports; Han's destination had ostensibly been anywhere away from the Alliance. At last she found herself in the cockpit, full now in the realization that Han was, in fact, the "casualty", and that he had not returned....

She ran her fingers up and down the leather of his pilot's seat. Images crowded her consciousness; images of times spent aboard this ship, aboard hers, aboard neither, days and nights together here, with the Alliance they both believed in but could not commit to, in the true friendship and affection each felt but neither would admit. One lone tear trickled down her cheek as she gazed at the controls... Han, where are you? You can't be dead--I won't let you be dead.... She couldn't check her grief now, and turned to go back to the *Giselle* to mourn in private.

Turning, she walked directly into eight feet of fur. *Tears, little one?* Chewbacca asked. *Do not waste sadness on our friend-Solo; he lives.*

Sharna used the back of her hand to wipe the stains from her face. "He's not dead?" A grin broke out from her face, and

as quickly disappeared. "Then where the hell is he, the dumb--"

Chewie put a paw over her mouth. *Hush, pilot lady--*

This made her stifle a laugh in spite of herself; for years Han had called her "Spacer Lady": a term only slightly more complimentary than "bar girl", but affectionately meant and affectionately received.

Han is alive, and is being taken to Jabba the Hut. Come with me, we will have a meal and a drink and I will tell you of how he saved us all.

"Han? You've got to be kidding!" Her mask had fallen again, her face free of the signs of emotions. "There's not a noble bone in that pirate's body. He'd sell his mother to buy sabacc chips."

She didn't mean a word of it, and knew Chewbacca knew.

Over shevet and molam they shared the story of what had happened on Bespin, and what Chewie had heard of Luke's adventures on Dagobah. Then began the "remember whens", and the evening ended with Chewie putting a tipsy Kallani to bed in her berth on the *Giselle*--more private than the quarters assigned her on board the cruiser.

* * *

MEDICAL RECORD: LEIA ELENU NERISSA OF
ORGANA, OF ALDERAAN
ENTRY: standard date 91/4130/5

It was confirmed today doubly by the Mechlle and Xotana tests that the Princess is pregnant, about three months into gestation (normal ten months for Alderaan, but since the child is a hybrid, deviation from normal can be expected). Her progress will be monitored daily with scans of the fetus and tests of her immunological reaction to the cross-chromosomal pregnancy. No complications are expected, since Corellian-Alderaan hybrids are not uncommon in the galaxy. REF: DSAC 99:220/1; JJQ 77:66/2; TS1 80:5/17.

MARRAH KENOBI, MEDICAL SECTION

* * *

Leia had suspected all along.

Now what? Can you handle a baby? How will you ever explain it to Council? How will you break it to Luke? How will you ever manage to be a princess, a councillor and a mother?

The speed of her decision astonished even the Jedi healer.

"Of course I'll have the baby--didn't you say it's a girl?"

A girl... and, therefore, Heir Presumptive to the wealth of Alderaan. The royal lineage on that world was inherited from the mother's blood, and Leia held her office by that right. Her father, hero though he had been on his own merits, was First Citizen of Alderaan by election, and Viceroy by virtue of having been consort of the monarch. He had taken, as was customary, his wife's surtitle, to maintain the name of the House of the Organa.

Thoughtfully, Leia added, almost to herself, "The last of the Organa--maybe she'll live to see an end to this, and the life of her foremothers."

Luke came in during the last of that discussion, and Marrie reprimanded him severely for eavesdropping. "Certainly as a Jedi you should have better manners, not to mention your breeding, which certainly should presuppose more decorum."

"Thank you very much," Luke answered with a grimace as the servo unwrapped the stump of his arm. "I'm not sure my breeding is your concern." He would soon be ready for a prosthetic device; the medical droid completed the measurements and replaced the plaskin shield.

At Luke's comment, Marrie turned away and busied herself with Leia's medical records.

"Well-- Luke, now you know." Leia's voice broke ever so slightly.

He looked down at the floor. "I suppose congratulations are in order."

"Yes, of course; why not?"

"Well, I suppose you have the right to do whatever you like, but-- Do you understand that this will cost you the better part of a year? And then you'll have so much work to do for that baby... Have you thought of what this will mean? Missing Council, being grounded, and I'll be going back to Dagobah, and Lando and Chewie are leaving for Tatooine in search of--the father-to-be..." He turned his back to Leia, and barely whispering, he added, "Leia-- how could you?"

"How could I what? Love Han? Not love you? Do you think I disregarded your feelings, that I didn't know? Luke, we didn't know if you were alive or dead. We had no idea if you'd made it through to the rendezvous point, if you had been killed or captured or what had happened.... When I felt you calling me I knew you had been trained, and quickly, but I had no idea

where or how... And dammit, Luke, I love him! I'm entitled to love him! Even if he's not the figurehead of the Alliance, the hope of the Jedi, the upright and proper future monarch of an asteroid field...." Tears flowed freely down her pale cheeks.

Marrie turned to look at Leia with worry etched on her face. "Are you all right, Princess?"

Leia shook her head affirmatively. "I'll be all right--I'm getting a little tired, that's all."

Kenobi's daughter smiled. "It's no wonder. You've been through a lot, too much for one's energy, let alone two's. Why don't you go rest now, take a nap."

"Yes. I think I'll go back to my quarters, if it's all right with my physician..." She smiled at Marrie, then turned to Luke. "I'd like to see you later, when we're both up to it, some time before you leave. Is that all right with you?" Or *else this tension will suffocate both--all three of us.*

Luke shrugged, his face long and downcast.

Not going to make this easy, are you? Well, neither have I. "Please?" Getting no answer, the Princess turned and started to leave the dispensary. Luke stopped her with his good hand on her arm as she passed him.

"Leia, I'm sorry--I'm being so selfish. It's taken me a long time to realize that you're not just a face in a hologram; there's a woman under those ceremonial robes. You know I love you, but-- Ben said it to me: 'Your destiny lies along a different path from mine.'"

"Thank you, Luke. You really are very special to me." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You always will be." Then she left the sick bay and started down the corridor to her cabin.

Marrie looked worriedly after them.

The Princess's quarters aboard the rebel cruiser *Alliance* were very severely decorated, considering her lineage and position in the rebellion. But she didn't want to put down roots, and besides, she was en route to the new base.... A base she hadn't seen, hadn't had a part in building or fortifying and had never sat in Council on...

Melita the Merciful, how I miss all that. Can I really be a mother and give up the fighting and have to hide away for the baby's sake? Can I not? Why, oh why did Alderaan have to die? It would be so

simple--I could have the baby, give it to the nurses there....

But then if Alderaan were still there, I would not have this baby at all, for there would have been no rescue, and no Luke, and no Han...

Han, where are you? How are you? What is Jabba going to do with you? If only you could hear me.... Someone told me once--was it Marrie when I was young?--that for Corellians to bear children requires an act of will, on the part of both parents. If that holds true with crossbreeds...oh, Han, you wanted this baby!

Didn't you?

Why didn't you ever ask me if I was doing anything to keep from becoming pregnant? You knew all my clothes, all my personal belongings were aboard that transport, the one we couldn't catch! I know you, you schemer, and you couldn't have forgotten something as important as that.

She had removed her white jumpsuit (it had already begun to get a little tight around the midsection) and put on a floor-length smocked robe. Knowing she should rest, she lay down on the sofa in her forequarters, leaning her head back on the armrest.

Oh, ^{*}Luke, Luke, I never meant to hurt you so much. And until Bepin I never realized how I'd been using you, teasing Han with you. Sometime I have to tell you--he's the one who bawled me out for it! Somehow the scene in sick bay on Hoth came up, when the scars on your face were healing and Han and I were doing our 'I love you/I hate you/you make me SO MAD' number; he was absolutely furious that I had been so careless about how much you obviously cared about me! I wish you could have seen him...

I wish we could see him now...

NO! Not the way I saw him last, with that horrible grimace of pain on his face, reaching out one last time--for me? I don't know. He's loved so many women, and really cared for them...

She sat up slowly and put her hand to her mouth. Oh, Salicha, poor Kallani! She'll be sick! They were together for three years that I know of, right here on this base! Not that either of them never went near anybody else, but he loved her, I know he did, he as much as said so... Probably not to her, if I know him, but even so...

She's never been other than kind to me; her first words when Han introduced us--after the usual 'Yer Worshipfulness' games--were that she was half-Alderaani, and when she'd heard of our sorrow she'd begun to feel half-dead.

Half-Alderaani...

Half-Corellian...

The princess began to laugh. Same as the baby! Maybe she can help me out sometimes... I bet she was a holy terror.

I owe it to her to tell her myself, before the general announcement to the base; after all, this is something I won't be able to keep from anyone very much longer....

She went to the wall and called Central Dispatch on the wallcom. "Has anyone seen Sharna Kallani?"

"Yes, Your Highness. She just checked in and said she'd be in the galley for the next few parts. A friend of hers from Atlaanta is here on fighter duty temporarily...."

"Thank you, dispatcher." Leia left her quarters for the galley. It wasn't a very long walk, and she found Kallani and a slightly-built blonde woman with the webbed hands of an Atlaantan drinking roao and laughing with Luke, who had had the dubious privilege of having Kallani fly his wing on many a mission. Kallani had lucked out over Hoth; they had needed pilots with large-craft evasive experience to fly the transports, and her smuggler's flying came in handy. She'd flown the last transport out, the one Leia should have been on, through as thick a blockade as the *Falcon*. Since her return, Leia'd heard the rumors that there had been no casualties from the bombardment, but quite a few from the maneuvering.

Luke glanced up from his cup and saw Leia come in. He seemed to concentrate on her intently; then he smiled and turned to Kallani's friend, saying, "They must have had to modify your fighter for a water-breathing pilot; can I see it?" They both rose, nodded to the princess and left, waist-deep in shop-talk.

Leia got herself a cup of roao and asked if she could sit down. At the other woman's nod she settled in the chair. She looked Kallani in the eye. "I don't know how to tell you this other than directly: Kallani, I'm pregnant. And the child is Han's." She waited.

The Corelliaani was silent for a moment. She stared into her cup, then looked up over long eyelashes and said, "Congratulations." Then a question crossed her mind and she added, "I assume...."

"Oh, yes, I'm going to have the child; it's a girl." She then hastened to add, "But that's not for general knowledge; I'm hoping they'll find Han before she's born, and it would be a hell of a welcome to find everyone congratulating you on a daughter you don't know about...."

Kallani let out one short, sharp laugh. "Sorry, Your Highness; it's just awfully hard to imagine Han Solo's kid with all that money. And a title--I bet it's a parsec long."

Leia giggled into her cup. "Yes. I think he'll think so too." She got very quiet.

"You thought I'd be angry?" Kallani smiled. "Why? You were out on that ship for eight months! I would've had him in the sack in eight centiparts!"

Both women laughed again and Leia took Kallani's hand. "I hope you'll help me; I've never raised a Corelliaani..."

"I guess I'll do what I can, if being one is a qualification...."

The official announcement was made as soon as they got back to T'filla Base. A huge party was planned for Princess Leia, to be held as soon as possible since Marrie, as her healer and friend, didn't know how long she would be able to keep the pregnant woman out of bed; cross-planet pregnancies got tricky in the final months and usually were spent either in the mother's quarters or in the infirmary/medical center.

The party was the baby shower to

end all baby showers. The princess received enough clothing for quintuplets, enough bedding for triplets, and enough odds and ends for twins. And two special gifts, that meant the world to Leia: one from Luke, a dispatch from him reading "For the new Princess Royal--one substitute father for as long as she needs him, from the time I return, love, Luke"; and from Kallani, a silverine mug, very tiny, that Han had brought her back from Commenor years ago, adorned with enamelwork and filigree--and made on Alderaan.

* * *

The baby was born after eleven and a half months of gestation. Marrie delivered it, with the mechos' help, and a great deal of sweat from those pacing the corridor. First in the door to greet the new Heir Presumptive was the base's other token Corelliaani, who was herself greeted with a hug from the mother and a squall from the infant.

Leia had a weak smile for her new friend; two stranger "bedfellows" (in one sense of the word, at least) had never been seen. Marrie was at the wallcom sending a message to Lando and Chewie on the *Falcon*: "Heir to Alderaan born at 1300 today; both mothers and infant are doing fine. Both mothers."



HONOR


Linda Deneroff

Lando Calrissian was angry. Just a standard day ago he had been governor of Bespin, a small quasi-legal mining colony on the fringes of Imperial space. Then the Empire had come in the guise of Darth Vader and his minions, and Calrissian had found himself trapped between a rock and a hard place not of his own making. Moreover, he mused, bemoaning his fate to no one but himself, there was nothing he could have done.

He sat in the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* and threw a quick glance at the other occupant of the tiny cabin. Lando had barely escaped with his life. And the fact that he had, left him now with an unwanted debt to pay.

Chewbacca's roar drew him back from his reverie. "I know. I know," Calrissian replied. "I usta' fly this bucket, remember." Chewbacca growled. Calrissian adjusted a few knobs and glanced at the navicomps. "We've still got a few minutes before we make the jump."

What did I do wrong? he asked himself rhetorically. *I had everything I wanted. Who asked Vader to butt in anyway?* He glanced once more at the 'comps. *Han, if you weren't an old buddy, I'd kill ya. Instead, I'm about to save yer ass.* "Chewbacca," he said aloud, "hit it."

The *Millennium Falcon* roared into hyperspace. 

LEDGER

Marcia Brin

The small group, ten in all, threaded its way through the crowded street, oblivious to the hustle and bustle around them. They were all garbed in the traditional dress of Arzalian traders and each of them, male and female alike, was heavily armed. They appeared quite comfortable with their weapons, though the one borne by their leader seemed somewhat large for her diminutive frame, as if made for someone considerably bigger. She walked with a grim purpose, and the others followed swiftly on her heels.

They were headed for that section of the spaceport that berthed their ship. Caril had once been a backwater planet in an overlooked corner of the Republic, and its miniscule spaceport had been sufficient for its needs. Then, two systems-full of rylum mines had been found, and Caril was on the space charts, the only stopover point between the distant mines and the Republic center. Suddenly the tiny spaceport was totally insufficient. Unfortunately, surrounding topography made it impossible to expand the existing facility, so various new sections were placed wherever there was space, as the need arose. The tiny contingent of Arzalians was heading from Section VII, East Wing, where their business had been conducted, to Section III, North Wing.

Their progress came to an abrupt halt when a transport, attempting to enter Port Section VI, became stuck, half-turned, unable to move forward to back in the narrow street. The dark-haired leader fumed impatiently, but, short of turning around and taking the long way around the city, there was nothing they could do. The side streets meandered aimlessly in all directions; only someone with long familiarity with them could be sure of arriving at their intended destination.

So they waited. None of the group

was willing to risk approaching their leader; she was virtually, by now, a walking glare. All of her subordinates were new to their organization, having joined less than one month ago. While they had come to respect her as a leader for her intelligence, dedication, courage and strength, they could not say that they liked her, finding her remote and of uncertain temper. Colleagues who had joined before they had, cautioned them not to be too hasty. "Under great stress," they said, "and going through difficult times. A real personal tragedy." But they would not elaborate, and none of the tiny group, though their curiosity had been aroused, had dared to ask her.

While waiting for the transport to get straightened out, one of them wandered casually over to the entrance to Section VI. A ship of strange design caught her eye. She took a second look. It resembled nothing so much as a giant cannon, the long barrel tilting skyward at a slight angle, the curve of its lower portion resting on a reddish, apron-like base. Coming closer, she could see its name. *Slave I*. She doubted it was a declaration of the owner's profession; even under the Empire, slave traders did not flaunt their calling openly. Still, the ship had an ominous feel to it.

Returning to her comrades, who were still unable to proceed, she tapped one of them, a close friend, on the shoulder and jerked her head in the direction of the strange ship. "You think that's a private joke?" she asked. "The *Slave I*?"

"What?"

They both jumped. She was staring at them, their leader; then she brushed past them to stare, in turn, at the ship. She said nothing, after that first exclamation, just stood and watched the vessel, her face closed and cold. Even when the transport

was freed, to the cheers and jeers of the crowd, she remained unmoving, and none of them dared to approach.

Suddenly, she stiffened. They followed her gaze to a figure emerging from the ship: strange and menacing, his entire head encased in a featureless mask, his upper torso protected by body armor. He was carrying a laser rifle, which they watched him lay down on a small cart near his vessel.

Abruptly, she turned, her movements declaring that she had come to a decision. Beckoning one of the group over, she handed him a small packet. "You and the others are to return to the ship. If I am not there within...thirty minutes after your arrival, you are to take off and return home."

She cut off his protest.

"If I am not there by then, I won't be coming." Her face was unreadable. "You have your orders. Follow them."

It was a dismissal. Though they knew they had no choice, none of them viewed the prospect of returning home without her with much enthusiasm. Especially as they would never be able to explain what had occurred; they didn't have the foggiest idea themselves.

She watched them until they were out of sight, then moved quietly into the landing bay, removing the tie that secured the blaster to the holster, and kicking off the safety with her thumb. So silent were her movements he was not aware of her presence until she stood in front of him, about twenty feet away. He had been leaning against the same cart upon which he had laid his rifle, reading a...what? a wanted poster? A silent snarl echoed in her mind. His last poster.

Softly. "Bounty hunter." An

acknowledgment; nothing more.

Bounty hunter. Trafficker in pain and grief. Cold and uncaring, not a thought for his "cargo." Special, precious cargo. Two months delivered now; two months forgotten.

He observed her a moment, both wariness and puzzlement evident in his movements. "I know you, woman." His voice sounded flat and tinny behind the mask. "Where?"

She said nothing, merely waited. It would come. A sudden stiffening of his pose, a tensing of his muscles, told her the connection had been made. He went for his rifle.

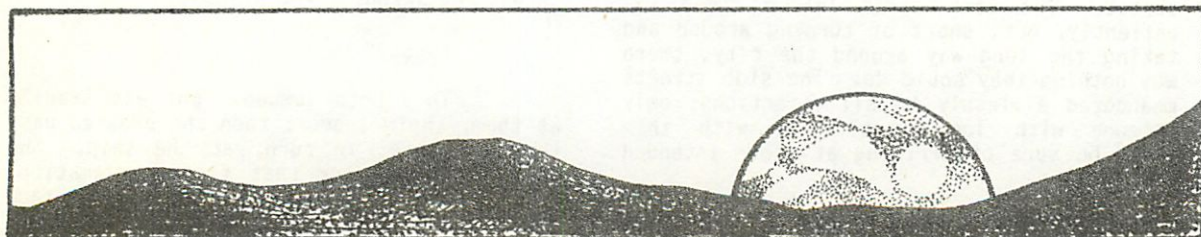
Now. Now she would find out if it had been wasted, the endless practice during every minute she could spare from her work, and every long, waking hour that should have belonged to sleep (there had been precious little of that these last two months). Accuracy she had always had; speed was what she had sought. And all for this moment.

He was fast; she was faster. Not as fast, perhaps, as the gun's original owner, but, then, few were. The body armor made a torso shot tricky, so she went first for his right arm, then, having disabled him, swiftly placed a shot just below his breastplate. Expressionlessly, she watched him fall.

The silence in the landing bay was a tangible presence, but she ignored it. "There is," she said softly, "to all things an accounting, bounty hunter."

Princess Leia Organa slipped Han Solo's gun back into his hand-tooled holster and, with a last, contemptuous glance at Boba Fett's still form, spun on her heel and strode from the spaceport.

No one got in her way.



he apparently fainted. The shock of his face, dirty with scuffling, white with a sudden spasm of pain, was twofold.

The vision was sufficient, that brief instant, to tell Thera all she thought she needed to know about why they were hurting him. The strong emotion that the recognition of Illerah's pain called up in Thera was intense; the other recognition was as sudden, as intense. She remembered now what she had thought the very first time she had seen him--she had thought that his face was familiar. Familiar in health and good spirits it was not, indeed. But in pain, his hair all in disorder, she recognized him now--the very same man she had been captive with, when she had come to this world. And these people, did they think that Illerah was that man, or what?

One of them was speaking to Illerah as he stirred to consciousness, speaking in the language he called "English." The one who still held him by one arm was making suggestions that Thera did not like to hear. "Tell him that we can always put it back the other way, if he wants the other one broken too--"

What the English-speaking one was saying to Illerah Thera did not quite catch. For Thera had heard the voice of the taller of the pair near her; heard, and recognized it, with a surge of hope, of relief, of grateful reassurance that did much to alleviate her fear for Illerah, her feelings of helplessness.

"Dammit, Jennie, y'can't be serious. Just because he looks like Koscuisko--"

Han. It was Han. It sounded like Han, at any rate, so much like Han--please, Thera prayed, may it please the God, let it be Han... she edged nearer, hoping for visual confirmation. It looked like Han--if only he would turn his head, just a little, just in that direction, she could see his face--

"And he's using Koscuisko's favorite alias, and--"

"Jennet, that could be a common name on Spicebean! There are plenty of Dhologourouki who look a lot like Koscuisko, after all--are you gonna work the man over just on the strength of the coincidence?"

"Damn straight!" The second of the pair was a woman, and she sounded determined. "It isn't just coincidence. You saw that he recognized the language, he's heard it spoken before. And Stildyne is prepared to stake his reputation that this Kur-y-a-kin recognized van Terr, too. So he's seen pantherix before. If he's not involved, where do you suppose he'd heard Standard and seen the likes of van Terr? No, he's--"

"Captain." Han's voice was firm; affectionate and understanding, sympathetic to the woman's distress, but undeniably firm. "Captain, I don't like to see you torture a man on presumption. So maybe he's worked with the smugglers, that doesn't mean he knows what's happened to your Chief Medical--"

The pantherix security troop had taken up that arm of Illerah's that was apparently damaged, and Thera feared the worst. As much as she wanted to wait, to conceal herself, to go for help, she couldn't keep still, not while they hurt Illerah--and if it was indeed Han, surely he would help her, support her. The woman was speaking, a note of desperation hard and keening in her voice.

"It's the best I can do, Han--presumption, possibility, it's all we've got to work with. I'll take whatever chances I--"

Illerah made a sound, and Thera spoke from out of the shadows, her own voice half-strangled with fear for herself and for Illerah. "I can tell you where the one you look for is--"

The two started at the sound of her voice, and security guards that Thera hadn't seen moved quickly to take her. The man turned toward her, and Thera saw that it was Han in fact. She heard another of Illerah's cries and she rushed forward to seize Han by the shoulders and shake him.

"Stop them!" she pleaded. Security was behind her now, drawing her away by main force; Han stared at her, apparently stunned by her unexpected appearance. "Stop them," she repeated, as they made to bind her arms behind her back. "Don't let them hurt him any more, Han--make them stop hurting him--"

Han seemed to shake off his temporary immobility. "Hey, let her go, you guys," he said. "She's friendly. Thera, kitten, how did you get here--" Thera, released, flew to him to be comforted, and he embraced her. "All your neighbors could tell me was that you'd been taken, but we couldn't find any record--I was worried about you, Thera--"

Thera in turn held on to Han gratefully; but pulled away almost immediately, remembering. Illerah. "Make them stop hurting him, Han. Illerah doesn't know. I came here with--who did you say he was? Koscuisko. The people left me here so I couldn't tell where they'd abandoned him--"

By this time Thera was the center of attention; captain, security, Illerah being supported by two of the security, all were gathered around Thera and the great green garbage bin. Thera exclaimed at Illerah's drawn face, his pain-pinched lips. She went to him, they did not hinder

her. "Illerah," she said, haltingly. How much of this could she make Illerah understand? "Illerah, one of these is a friend, they won't beat you any longer. You're hurt, Illerah--what should we do next?"

"You have very determined friends," Illerah told her, somewhat weakly, but with humor in his voice nonetheless. "The tallest one, over there, has my communicator. Ask them all out to Headquarters, Thera--Mr. Waverley just loves company--"

* * *

Several hours later, and the last details of Thera's story were still being digested by the party that had treated Illya so rudely. Everyone--Thera, Illya, Napoleon, ETs, everyone--sat around in one of Mr. Waverley's secure conference rooms drinking coffee.

The ETs were talking in their own language, waiting for a report from an UNCLE agent in Seattle. Thera was talking--again, in that other language--with the one ET who wasn't wearing some sort of uniform, a tall, not-quite-respectable looking male. Illya eyed this "Han" sourly. He supposed some women might find Han attractive, but he looked like a ruffian to Illya.

Napoleon was apparently totally absorbed in watching the female ET. She didn't have a tail--only one of the party, eight ETs in all, seemed to be of Thera's race or species--but she did, apparently, have command, which would be even more fascinating to Napoleon than three tails. Illya looked sourly at Napoleon, too, just so Napoleon wouldn't feel left out. Napoleon came up with some of what Illya considered the most provincial attitudes sometimes.

Mr. Waverley was watching from another room, via the closed-circuit; Illya scowled at what he felt was a likely place for a hidden camera, just for good measure. There. Everyone had been duly notified of the Kuryakin displeasure. Did it affect anyone, in the slightest? No.

Illya closed his eyes, his mind separated from the sensations of his body by the comforting distance provided by anesthesia. His arm would be in a cast for some weeks. No one had even expressed an interest in signing it yet. If this was all the attention he was going to get he might as well return the broken arm to the infirmary and see if he couldn't check out some more interesting and exotic ailment.

The intercom signalled, and Illya, opening his eyes, sat up and touched the switch.

"Kuryakin."

"Bronland, sir. In Seattle." And sounding wide awake for all that it was just past one in the morning, in Seattle. "It's negative report, sir."

"No record of a Kuragin? or a Kuryakin look-alike?"

"Checked everywhere," Bronland answered. "Police records, hospitals, the morgue, First Hill, the waterfront--you name it. Nothing."

"Thank you, Bronland. Go to bed," Illya advised, and closed the channel.

The discouraging news had evidently been translated for their guests by the one English-speaking ET and Thera simultaneously. There was quite a conference going on; and at its conclusion the captain, Han, and one of the others got up. Han said something to Thera, perhaps a question; Illya couldn't tell, but then Illya was feeling no pain. Then the three who had risen left the room--Illya didn't know where they thought they were going. Thera rose and came to him where he sat in his chair, being cross.

"Illerah," she began; sat down next to him, and took his good hand, uncertainly. "I am leaving now."

"Yes, I suppose you are," Illya agreed. Somehow it seemed to him that he had always known her people would come for her. "They are friends, aren't they? I mean--Thera, you don't have to go."

"I should, Illerah. It is not my place, here. Do you understand?" She seemed deeply moved by the whole situation. Illya thought it perhaps just as well he was sedated. Women in distress tended to terrify him.

"They're your community, Thera, I know that. I will miss you. You could come back and visit, you know."

"Perhaps I will visit, Illerah." She sat for a moment longer, holding his hand. "You'll have to close the bedroom window, I left it open, I was in such a hurry to get out."

It occurred to Illya then to wonder how Thera had managed to find him, to appear so fortuitously in the alley. He pondered the wisdom of asking; decided against it. Too much effort.

"And there is a book there for you. You can share it with Sigirri, perhaps."

"Certainly." Illya was getting very sleepy now, between the effects of shock, of pain, of painkiller, of the

DUAL DECISION

He has been different
since that incredible time of my transfer
to that other starship *Enterprise*,
existing in its parallel dimension and time.

He is different since his return
from that alternate *Enterprise*
with its beliefs that offer new hope
to our civilization
drowning in its own blood thirst.

He is very dangerous now.
My spies closely observe his every move.
Changes have been subtle and minute, almost indiscernable,
but change he has.

He is even more dangerous now.
His ruthless, single-minded quest for power
may well bring about our final destruction
long before my plans can achieve maturity.

Instinct clamors kill him quickly,
before he can seriously threaten me
and the power base I have carved
with such ruby-stained care.

Logic demands he be eliminated
without hesitation or delay
before he finds the proof of my treason
which he seeks so diligently.

Yet for the first time
I find myself denying
the very razor sharp reflexes
I have honed to serve me so well.

Never before have I rejected
the conclusions logic reaches,
but I find myself doing so now.



No concrete facts support my decision
but I refute existence of deeper reasons;
stubbornly I concede to myself no more
than that for now it is better to watch and wait.

I know the dictates of my reasoning
are not faulty,
yet I shall not follow them.
Uncharacteristically, I refuse, for now,
to explore the whys of my decision.

Though I know he may already be
plotting my assassination,
I will do nothing to harm him.
Strange this (*infuriating!*),
but I cannot change my gut level feeling.
I am unsure I want to. I must think!

My death warrant may well have been signed,
but I am unable to take steps against him.
Fascinating and illogical.
I must consider this phenomenon!



SANDCASTLES

Eileen Roy

Governor Tiberius J. Kirk fought to breathe calmly, without effort. The small antechamber where he waited for his audience with the Prefect General was miles underground, hidden deep within the mammoth asteroid, along with the rest of the palace. Prefect Alceistis was--'security conscious'. Kirk twitched irritably on the silver chain, and the slave-boy, dreamy-eyed, moved nearer.

The murals took his attention off his own claustrophobia, briefly. Tiled scenes in history, they spoke of three thousand years of Empire. Expansion, battle, consolidation, further expansion, over and over again. A world. A system. A galaxy... There were rebellions occasionally. The Empire crushed them. The Empire held on to what it possessed.

So did he.

* * *

The salt breeze of Saes'he blew in the open stone windows of the governor's mansion. Children shrieked in play below, on the sand. Kirk strode restlessly to the window to look out. Native children. Had they no respect-- He turned his cheek, half-unconsciously, into the caress of air, listening both outside and in.

"When I grow up I will create, not destroy!" The boy brandished a paintbrush, eyes bright. He looked a proper Imperial. Well, his mother said he was half...

"No, no," Amalthea said gently. "You reason falsely. Destruction and creation are two sides of the same coin, meaningless without each other. Death is a part of life. Can you tell me why?"

More Saes'han philosophy, to go with Saes'han superstitions. Kirk did not believe in witchcraft or psionics. But it

kept the people quiet. With Amalthea their chosen liaison between him and the planetary council... She was pretty enough; he hadn't minded taking her brats, too, to keep her happy. This planet was his. He would keep it, for the Empire.

The little girl playing in a pool of sunshine held out her arms. Amalthea laughed, and swept her up, the three of them a portrait of a family. Kirk watched them, palm against sun-warmed stone, breeze ruffling his hair.

Mine...

Outside, children shrieked in delight as the castle they had built with such laborious care crumbled, gloriously, under the sea.

* * *

"The Prefect will see you now."

Kirk nodded and followed him in. The audience chamber was rich with hangings, carpets, munificent fittings. Spy beams hid behind every panel of fabric, probing him gently, inevitably. The Prefect headed this entire arm of Imperial expansion. Without him--

Kirk strode to the dais, the slave-boy his shadow, and bowed with the exact degree of respectful obeisance.

"Ah. Governor. From Saes'he, is it?"

The Prefect knew already. He always knew.

"Yes, Prefect."

"You come accompanied?"

Kirk bowed slightly, again. "A

gift, Prefect. From the people of Saes'he."

"A slave-boy? But, Governor, I already possess a plentitude of slaves, of every conceivable age, sex, and species. And indeed, my tastes do not run in that direction..."

Kirk's expression did not alter. "He is a seer, Prefect."

Prefect Alceistis's eyes narrowed suddenly. The guards beside the dais neither moved nor blinked, and the spy beams remained, but they were suddenly less important. "A seer..." He stirred after a moment. "I am...pleased to have my preliminary reports of Saes'he's potential verified so quickly." His eyes moved over them, measuring, assessing. He made no sign to take the chain from Kirk. "Your subjects may prove more useful to the Empire than you had ever dreamed."

"My subjects?" Kirk asked mildly. "How could Saes'he--a world of superstitious barbarians only recently uplifted by Imperial rule--how could my poor world benefit the Empire?" His emphasis on the possessive was barely noticeable. Alceistis eyes' narrowed again.

"Governor...Kirk. You were a starship captain until recently, were you not?" asked the Prefect, who knew. "Of the I.S.S. *Enterprise*?"

"Yes, Prefect."

"There was...some trouble aboard that ship?"

"An attempted rebellion. Vulcanized. He managed to gather almost half of the ship-- I put it down. Quietly."

"Ah, yes. Re-instituting public crucifixions in the wardroom. I recall reading the reports. It was well done, Kirk. It earned you the governorship."

"I am a man of the Empire, Prefect. I keep what I have."

The two men watched each other. Enlarged pupils staring into infinity, the slave-boy waited.

* * *

"Even you can see he looks like you."

"I don't remember. One raid, eleven years ago-- I don't remember. And I would remember you."

"It doesn't matter," Amalthea shrugged, half laughing. He went after her, caught her arm.

"It does matter. Why do you let it

go, always, so easily? It's important. To him, to me."

"He knows. You amuse him, I think, with your protestations of ignorance. But if you don't want to know then you will not, and nothing he or I can say will make a difference. You are what you are, and will not be changed."

"Barbarian," Kirk said, teasing. "None of us are fated for any particular role."

"Still, we all do what we must do."

"You give in too easily. Your beliefs, your culture--you let them slip through your fingers like the sand and the wind. Even your children fly to the Empire like gulls for new tidbits. You give them up so easily--"

"Oh, no," she said, and he was shocked to hear tears in her voice. She, who never cried. "Not easily. Never easily." She dashed the tears away and turned to face him. "We do what we must."

* * *

"And if you had--more, Governor--" Alceistis watched the slave-boy, fingers curling with greed. A corps of psionics, slaved and conditioned, could put him within spitting distance of the throne itself. He did not reach out to the boy's chain. "--would you keep that as well?"

"More, Prefect?"

"The governorship of Kettil falls open soon. Very soon."

"Kettil... A rich system. Very rich, and close to the Imperial hub," Kirk recalled slowly. "Close to the court..." His thumb stroked silver links absently. "And the people of Saes'he?"

"They will be cared for," Alceistis said warmly. "Well-cared for, and guided. Cherished wards of the Empire." Of course. As psionic slaves, seers and telepaths and clairvoyants, perfectly attuned to the will of their master...

Kirk did not believe in Saes'he superstitions. He did not. However, the Prefect's agents he'd discovered on Saes'he three months ago did. He could guess what their reports had said.

"Kettil," he murmured. "Prefect--I am a loyal Imperial subject. My only will is to serve the Empire--wherever I may be of most use."

"Of course." The Prefect smiled for the first time. "Of course... A moment." He turned to consult with the technician at his elbow. Kirk recognized

him. They had been probed all along, of course, analyzed and examined down to their molecular structure, but some tests took longer than others. Kirk watched as the gleam in the Prefect's eyes changed to open cupidity--and an amusement he refused to recognize.

"Well," Alceistis reached for the silver chain. Kirk put it in his hand, and the slave-boy stepped unquestioningly to his new master. "It seems you have indeed brought me--a gift. A most precious gift. It must pain you to give him up..."

"For the Empire, Prefect," Kirk said woodenly. Had they run a gene comparison? It could not have shown anything. It could not have.

"For the Empire." Alceistis nodded, dismissing him. The amusement lingered in his eyes. "We will talk again, Governor. Perhaps about this--boy of yours..."

* * *

He was released, escorted down corridors tht led finally up and out. Back

to Saes'he, to open skies, waves, sand-- Leaving behind a drugged slave-boy, ten years and three months old, with eyes like his own, in the hands of a man who did not really know what psionics could mean.

"Sometimes the union of Saes'he and non-Saes'he results in a particularly impressive talent," Amalthea's voice said faintly in his memory. "The boy is powerful. Very powerful."

He did not believe. But there was no other chance. So he had plotted.

Or they had...

As soon as Kirk left the asteroid, the first time Prefect Alceistis came within touching distance of the slave-boy, they and everyone else within twenty meters would explode into shredded flesh and bone.

"I am a man of the Empire!" Kirk thought. He tried desperately to picture his palace, his woman, his world. "What is mine--I keep!"

Sandcastles.



a price for necessity

Your face appeared to me again last night.

Once more I endured your branding hazel gaze
filled with incredulous disbelief and soul-searching betrayal.
James Kirk, will you never release thy iron grip from my mind?

Vulcan's logic states I did no more
than what was necessary
to preserve the safety/order of the higher good.

Why then does my human side ceaselessly cry out
for the one brutal man who, allowed to live,
would have destroyed with callous, unthinking surety
my fragile plans for revolution?

No rest nor inner peace are mine now.
I stoically accept nevermore shall they be.
Their burning loss and my nightly haunting
by your pain-drenched, death-masked face
are but a small part of the price I pay
for the "honor" of summoning the future.

Sarah Leibold



Amman 10000

Second Chance

Joan Marie Verba

Everyone else gets post-con depression, Holly thought, but I'm the only one who gets mid-con depression. She plodded to the elevator and hit the button. Only one elevator was working, and that was on the 4th floor, on its way up to the 15th. She leaned on the wall next to the elevator, placing her shoulder and head against the wallpaper.

Saturday night, but no one to be found. Helen and Sandy had already gone to bed. Petra was in the con suite with the folksingers. Ginny and Dena were in the film room watching *2001*. Laura and Geoff had gone on a late dinner expedition. Most con members, it seemed, were in one of those other places; all except Holly, who had made the rounds of the lobby and the hallways and the con facilities looking for a fan to talk to. She hoped the elevator would come before she started to cry. It was now on the 12th floor, going up.

Holly sighed, turning her back on the registration desk lest anyone there notice her tears. The plane fare, the room, were going to set her back considerably. All her bills were paid, the rent was paid, the plane fare was paid, even the hotel bill was already paid, but there was little more from her last paycheck for the rest of the month. To make it worse, she had gone and bid on that irresistible piece of artwork. The auctioneer had said, "So you'll starve for the rest of the month, so what?" She wondered if he knew.

Pushing herself away from the wall, she looked up again. Fifteenth floor, going down. She shifted her weight uneasily. Just last year she'd flunked her Ph.D. exam in physics. Then she found a company willing to underlook her qualifications and hire her as a programmer trainee. But a trainee's job brought a trainee's salary; when her membership renewal in the American Physical Society came up again, she'd had to

let it lapse. The last issue of *PHYSICS TODAY* she'd received before the subscription ran out had had an article from a former physicist turned stockbroker. He said that a physicist having to seek employment out of the field must drop any illusion that he or she would ever be employed in the field again. She wondered how he knew.

The elevator doors opened. A group of people came out, laughing. Not fans--they must've come from the penthouse nightclub. Holly forced a smile as they looked curiously at her nametags. Then she slipped past them into the elevator.

The doors shut. Holly pressed a button, then slouched against the back rail. It went up, and up, and up--past her floor. "Oh, hell," she muttered to herself. She leaned forward, brushing the correct button with her finger.

Just then, the door opened. A strange light played in the hallway in front of her, like moonlight through prisms. She stepped forward, holding the doors open. There must be fans around after all, engineering this effect. But the hall was quiet. Curious, she slid into the corridor.

At once, she became dizzy. Her body froze for a few moments, then relaxed. She fell to her knees, eyes closed. There was a low, distant hum of well-tuned machinery. She opened her eyes.

She was sitting in the middle of an octagonal corridor with deep blue walls. It was dim; what light there was seemed to come from below. Holly shook her head. Someone had made the 13th floor into a mockup of the *Enterprise*. She crawled to the wall, sitting with her back against it, admiring the work.

Someone was coming down the hall. Looking to her right, she saw a man dressed

in what appeared to be one of the new *Enterprise* security outfits coming toward her. She smiled up at him as he stopped in front of her. He held a tricorder replica in one hand, a phaser replica in the other. Pointing the tricorder at her, he said, "Security scan negative."

She raised both eyebrows.

The man waved the phaser at her. "Will you come with me, please?"

"Certainly, sir," said Holly, playing along. She shouldered her purse and stood up awkwardly, feeling an acute lack of energy. When she was on her feet, the man motioned her to go ahead of him. She nodded, then leaned forward, to read his nametag. There was none.

"I don't believe we've met," she said.

"I'm Ensign Perez," said the man.

"Whatever you say."

"This way, ma'am, please?" he said, waving the phaser again.

"OK." She padded off in the direction he indicated. The carpet was wonderfully soft, like walking on mossy ground. Someone had done their homework. When Holly passed a door on her right, Perez stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"In here, please."

"All right." The doors opened as Holly turned and stepped forward. She gasped, pulling back from what she saw, and knocked the back of her head against Perez's chest armor. He grabbed her arm, pulling her in firmly but gently. Holly crouched down, staring up wide-eyed at the *Enterprise* layout on the wall. A light showed their present location.

"Deck five," said Perez.

The movement was sharp and sudden. Holly flung her arms out wide to support herself, letting her purse drop to the floor. Just as she got her balance, the lift stopped. She fell to the floor on her hands and knees.

Perez waited at the door as Holly picked herself up. He motioned her out. She shouldered the purse again, walking out in a daze.

Soon Perez stopped at another door, indicating that she should enter ahead of him. Two steps inside, she swung around to face the wall, placing one hand over her open mouth.

"I don't believe this," she murmured into her hand.

Someone behind her was tugging her arm. She closed her eyes tightly, shaking her head. The pull became insistent, but her legs just wouldn't move. She began to shake all over.

"She appears to be in a state of shock," said an all-too-familiar voice.

Her breath came out in a large sob. Her knees turned to butter. Someone grabbed her from behind with two hands, led her about a dozen steps to her right, and deposited her in a chair. She kept her eyes on the floor all the time. Now she watched her hands tremble in her lap.

Someone touched her shoulder. "You all right?" said another familiar voice with a Southern accent, almost in her ear.

Holly sighed. Well, she'd have to look up sometime. Raising her head slowly, she saw the table in front of her, a blue uniform, an orange circle, a high collar, and it was, it was. Spock. Holly set her jaw and sat erect in the chair. She put her arm on the table, turning slightly to the right. Kirk. Admiral Kirk. She looked to the person sitting next to her. McCoy.

"That will be all, Ensign Perez," said the Admiral. Holly turned the other way. Perez nodded and left.

She turned back to the men, taking another look at them. Yes and no. Yes, they were recognizable, but they recalled the actors she knew like George C. Scott recalled the real General Patton. Or, rather, vice versa.

"I suppose this is all strange to you," said Kirk.

"Well, uh...a little," said Holly. She couldn't get over how very impressive Kirk was. Something about him was electric, magnetic, charismatic. Yes, that was it--charismatic. She could well believe that 490 Starfleet crewmembers would be willing to follow this man anywhere. And he was so damned attractive. She sighed.

"Unfortunately, we know very little about the device that brought you here as yet," said Spock.

Holly turned to study him. He was a lot like he was on film: tall, slender, weatherbeaten, but also, a**i*e*n. His facial expression, his gestures, his tone of voice, were like nothing she'd ever seen or imagined before. Subtle differences in the muscle structure? Yes, probably. Nothing other than the shape of his body suggested anything remotely human. If he was indeed half-Vulcan, she wondered what a full Vulcan was like. "Device?" she asked.

"Indeed. There is a device on the planet below us which seems to be

selectively disturbing the spacetime in our sector. At the moment, the main area of disturbance is at deck seven...."

"...which has been evacuated, as you saw," said Kirk. He motioned to the screen behind him, "and as you can see now."

"Precisely. The device also seems to include some sort of transportation mechanism, though we do not entirely understand the controls at this moment."

"I see," said Holly.

"Our chief engineer is on the planet now, trying to determine if we can shut it down. Of course, if we can figure it out, we'll try to send you back where you came from."

"The odds, however, are not in your favor."

"Do you have to put the worst face on the situation?" said McCoy. Spock lifted an eyebrow in response. Holly smiled and turned to her right. McCoy looked like a man in his prime; he looked like someone to whom the fifties were the midpoint of his lifespan, who could be expected to live fifty or sixty more years in good health. So did Kirk, for that matter. Vital. Alive. They all looked that way. Not celluloid on a screen. Real.

"Well," said Kirk, "until we can determine whether or not we can send you home, you can consider yourself our guest."

"Thank you," said Holly, putting all her breath into the two words.

"I'm glad you're not disappointed," said Kirk with a grin.

"Oh, no."

"What's your name?" asked McCoy.

"Svoboda. Holly Svoboda."

"Ms. Svoboda," Kirk said, and nodded. "I'm James T. Kirk, the captain of this vessel. This is my first officer, Mr. Spock, and my chief medical officer, Dr. Leonard McCoy." He indicated each of them with a sweep of his hand.

She felt a shiver of excitement travelling up her spine.

"What are those on your dress?" asked McCoy.

She lowered her head. "Oh, these. Badges." She put a finger on each of the four in turn.

"Are those designs or lettering?" asked Spock.

Holly looked up at him. So the language was different. But the speech wasn't. Must be some sort of universal translator effect. Then she looked down again. "Each of these is my name. Except this one."

"What does that say?" asked Kirk.

"'Death will not release me from fandom.'"

"Is 'fandom' your religion?" asked Spock.

She blinked. "No." The men looked at her inquiringly. "Um, fandom is meeting new people. Seeking out a lot of different experiences." She raised both arms, tracing circles in the air with her hands as she spoke.

Kirk rubbed his chin. "I see. That's why you don't mind being here."

She put her hands down and pointed at Kirk. "That's exactly right."

"Where did you come from, by the way?" What's your home planet's name?" asked Kirk.

She winced. "It's not very original."

"Probably some variant of 'earth'," Spock suggested.

"Why are you so reluctant to name your planet?" asked McCoy.

"Our missions are peaceful, I assure you," said Kirk.

She traced patterns on the desk with her fingertips. "I'm not sure whether I'm out of your past or from a parallel universe, or what."

"That would make a difference," said Spock.

McCoy leaned over slightly in his chair. "You mean if she was the ancestor of someone important..."

"...or of historical consequence herself, we would have to find some way to return her," finished Spock.

Kirk looked over at her. "We can check the computer records."

"However, many historical records of Earth were lost in the Eugenics Wars. If she is from that time, or before it, it may be difficult to ascertain whether or not she will have an impact on our time."

"Well, there's an easy way to tell if she's not from our past. All I have to do is run an examination on her and find out

if she's the same species we are."

Kirk nodded. "It might also give us a clue to where she's from."

"Is that all right with you?" asked McCoy, turning to her.

She spread her hands. "Fine."

"All right, let's go then," said McCoy, getting out of his chair. Holly followed suit. When Kirk stood up, she stared at his stomach. Hell, the man was trim!

"They're medical scanners. We each have one."

She looked up to see Kirk pointing at his own scanner, then to Spock's and McCoy's.

"Oh, yes; I see," said Holly.

McCoy touched her arm as he passed her; Holly followed.

"I'll wait here for your report, Bones," Kirk called as they went out.

Holly set her purse next to the bodyscan table support and slipped off her shoes, nudging them under the table with a foot.

"You don't have to do that," said McCoy.

"Oh. Sorry." She looked down nervously, fishing for a shoe with her foot.

"You don't have to put them back on, either; just lay down."

"All right." She sat on the edge of the table, reaching back with a hand. The surface in the middle was clear, flexible, and warm to the touch. She settled down into it. It was like laying on a long beanbag couch; it fit the contour of her body very comfortably.

"Well, let's see what you're made of, shall we?" said McCoy, working some controls on a side panel and watching the monitor as the scanner flickered over her.

Holly turned her head to the side, watching the picture. She was reminded of the "invisible woman" models in the hobby stores. Only this was a motion picture--she could see her heart pumping, the blood rushing through the veins and arteries, the lungs expanding and contracting.

"If you're not human, you're pretty close to it," said McCoy. He touched more controls; the pictures changed, emphasizing various details. He examined the monitors

carefully. "Let's try a blood scan," he said after a while, moving to another part of the complex. Looking up and over McCoy's shoulder, she could see a readout on another screen, with figures instead of pictures. When he went back to his original station, a familiar double helix appeared. After a few minutes' study, he again went over to the secondary monitors, then back to the original monitor, and so on, as if correlating data. Finally, he came over and stood at her left shoulder. He looked down at her, smiling.

"Well, you've got variations in the structure and position of your organs, but nothing different from individual variations in our own species."

"I'm not one of you?"

"No," he said amiably, "you've got six amino acids basic to your body chemistry that are different from ours. And our amino acid chain has been the same as far back as records can tell us."

Holly raised herself on her elbows. "I guess that settles that, then."

McCoy put a hand on her shoulder. "There're a few other things I want to talk to you about, if you don't mind."

"Such as?" said Holly, settling herself back down on the table.

"Such as your eyes. I see you're wearing lenses."

"What?" Holly touched her glasses. "Oh, these."

"Has your vision changed lately?"

"Not in several years."

"Do you know whether this is hereditary?"

"I think so. Mother is near-sighted, too. When I got my glasses, I asked the doctor if I'd ever be able to see right without them. He said no."

"Nonsense! The tissue there is perfectly healthy! It's just a matter of adjusting the retina--why, I was performing that operation in my first year of residency. There's no reason why anyone should have to wear things like those!" He pointed to her glasses.

"Where I come from, that kind of operation is still experimental."

"At least they're making some progress!" He sighed. "Just stay here; I'll be right back," he added in a softer tone.

Just as she was beginning to wonder

if he had forgotten about her, he returned with a hypospray. He stopped next to the table. "I take it you've had allergies all your life?"

Her mouth dropped open. "How...?"

"I'm a doctor, that's how!"

"I withdraw the question."

"Good. I'm going to have to do something about those, before you start reacting to something around here."

"What can you do, if you don't mind my asking?"

McCoy held up the hypospray. "I'm going to give you something that will start your own system working to counteract the mechanism that triggers your allergies. It took me a while to adapt what we use here to your own body chemistry, but I think it'll work all right." He placed the point against her arm. There was a low hiss.

"You have crewmembers with allergies?" said Holly, rubbing her arm.

He smiled. "No. Starfleet personnel get antiallergenic treatments before leaving their home worlds; that is, of course, if they haven't had it in the normal course of their lives. It's the passengers we get that have never been offworld before that start having allergic reactions. Not always, of course, but sooner or later almost everyone will react to something."

"How long will the treatment last?"

McCoy looked shocked. "Why, permanently."

Holly sat up. "You mean no more allergies? No more asthma?"

"That's right," he said, and grinned.

She squealed with joy and threw her arms around his waist.

"You're welcome," he said, pulling away gently. "Your lung tissue hasn't deteriorated too much. You should live to a ripe old age now, instead of dying twenty years before your time from emphysema." He paused, considering her for a moment. Then he continued, "Most cases of allergy or nearsightedness I see are from people who've developed it from injury or disease or environmental exposure. We've pretty much eliminated any pathological condition caused by heredity."

"You're way ahead of us then," she said as she slid off the table and reached for her shoes.

"And there's no need for people to suffer from things like that. Why, other than having bad eyesight, which is not beyond correction, by the way, you're in excellent condition."

"Thank you. I try," she said as she slipped into her shoes. Then she reached down and grabbed her purse.

When she stood up again, McCoy said, "If you're ready, I'd like to introduce you to someone."

"Sure."

Holly followed him out to the next room. There a petite young woman stepped forward as they entered.

"Ms. Svoboda, this is Yeoman Rita Barnes. The Captain asked her to show you around. Yeoman Barnes, this is Holly Svoboda."

"Pleased to meet you," said Holly.

"I have to report to the Captain," said McCoy. "Enjoy yourself."

As he left, Holly turned to Barnes. "Come with me, please," Barnes said.

Without another word, she escorted Holly to an empty cabin. Once inside, she showed Holly around the room, explaining the shower and sanitary facilities in a droning voice. She finished the speech by saying, "I'll get back to you around dinnertime," and left before Holly could ask any questions.

Holly sat on the bed, staring blankly at the door. She let the purse slide off her arm and onto the floor. When she looked to see where it was, she noticed the badges again, so she took them off and put them in her purse.

She wondered, as she settled back into the bed, what was going on at the convention. What would happen when she didn't reappear? Nothing today, probably. Or even tomorrow. They might think she'd just had an emergency and gone home. She didn't have any roommates, too proud to admit she would've been a lot better off sharing a room. After the con, the hotel would just throw out her luggage and assume she'd skipped town.

Sooner or later her parents would call the authorities. She hoped her friends wouldn't be under suspicion for foul play. On second thought, probably not--they genuinely couldn't know where she'd gone, or even when. And her parents--she remembered seeing parents of the MIAs on TV, still in anguish a decade after their children were missing, not knowing whether they were dead or alive. Her parents couldn't collect on her life insurance or get into her bank

accounts, not for some years, anyhow.

And in the meantime, what about her? The *Enterprise* would have to drop her off on a starbase or colony. And then what? She was worse off here than she was at home. At least, at home she'd had a job, a place to sleep, and a credit rating. Here she didn't even have those. She doubted if there was anything like a Home for Wayward Aliens. The show was never specific about such things.

Then a thought occurred to her. If she was to survive, she'd have to join Starfleet, just as her Dad had enlisted in the Air Force when he was out of a job. At least that way she'd have a place to stay, something to eat, maybe even a salary. The academy was out--if it was anything like the service academies at home, she'd probably have to know a Federation High Commissioner or something. It was doubtful that she could pass the entrance exams--here, they probably gave higher order differential equations to eighth graders. Standards for enlistees were probably high, too, but she should be able to qualify for something clerical. She had a number of graduate courses in computer science--maybe she could enter data in a duotronic system, even if she couldn't program one.

She pushed her glasses up her nose, a gesture she did without thinking, until now. Maybe she could convince McCoy to do that operation here, if it was so routine. If not, she hoped Starfleet would take her, and then let her have the operation. If not that, what was she to do? She didn't know anybody, she couldn't do anything.... Then she remembered--she couldn't read their language. So much for Starfleet. Holly took off her glasses and began to cry.

Barnes shook her awake. "Do you want to come and eat or not?"

"What?" Holly groaned. Oh, yes, the *Enterprise*. The Trekker's dream--or nightmare. She fished for her glasses and put them on. Then she slid off the bed, reached for her purse, and followed Barnes out.

Barnes reached the mess hall ahead of her. Holly plodded along behind. Once inside, Barnes found a wall dispenser and pushed a series of lighted squares at the side. A tray of food came out. She invited Holly to do the same, with a gesture, then went away to sit with a group in the middle of the room.

Holly stared stupidly at the controls, running a hand through her hair. She didn't know what the buttons meant, despite Barnes's explanation. Even if she did, she hardly knew what to ask for. It occurred to her that her food allergies must

now be gone, but even so, there was still the problem in indigestion if she ate something that didn't agree with her.

The more she stood there, staring at the thing, the more nervous she became. The others in the room were probably watching her. She didn't feel very hungry, but she wasn't fully awake yet. She couldn't remember how she got there, much less how to get back. She sure as hell wasn't going to make a fool of herself and ask Barnes to explain the controls again. Finally, she pushed a sequence, trying to copy the one that Barnes had used. To her relief, a tray slipped out. Turning around, she spotted an empty table in a corner.

She sat, fixing her eyes on the tray. After a few nibbles of the food, she decided it was all right and began to eat in earnest. When she heard someone sit down across from her, she looked up, straightening in her chair.

Across from her was a thin, dark-skinned woman with short hair. Her insignia circle was red; there was a full gold stripe on her shoulder. She smiled at Holly as she reached across the table. "Fana Ngwane, technician first class."

Holly took her hand, returning the smile. "Holly Svoboda, physicist bottom class. Pleased to meet you."

Ngwane sat back in the chair. "I remember the first time I was on a starship. My father was the Federation representative on Antara III when a conference was called to admit it to the Federation. I had already decided that I wanted to be an engineer, and I wanted to see those engines so badly I could taste it. Then the chief engineer saw me sulking in a corner. He took me on a tour of the engine room. That was the happiest moment of my life, next to when I got my commission, of course."

Holly nodded.

"Would you like to see engineering after we eat?"

"I sure would," said Holly, "thanks."

Ngwane nodded to the technicians on duty as they walked into the engine room. Holly peered over the shoulder of one of them, trying to make sense out of the flowchart on the console. She'd like to see Lt. Mary Sue fix that with a hairpin!

"There isn't much to do when we're in standard orbit," Ngwane said. "It's a lot more exciting when we go into warp."

"I can imagine," said Holly,

smiling. She peered down the engine shaft, then turned back to the console.

"I suppose, as a physicist, this is all familiar to you."

Holly shook her head. "I'm afraid, as a physicist, I probably know less about this than your average civilian. I'm a grad-school dropout."

Ngwane indicated the other technicians with a broad sweep of her arm. "Half the crew never got past technical school. Those of us who went to the academy got the equivalent of a bachelor's and were shipped out."

"Yes, but where I come from we're way behind you. What I learned in my graduate courses you probably got in high school."

Ngwane lifted an eyebrow. "We can check that out. Come on up to my cabin and we'll see what the computer can tell us."

"I'm afraid I can't read your language."

"That's no problem. The computer works mainly by voice command. If you can't follow what's on the screen, it'll read it aloud to you. Besides, Interlang is so easy to pick up, you'll probably start making the basic associations in the first few minutes."

Holly watched as Ngwane swung the screen over, reading the evaluation. "You're right about not being at graduate level. You only have the basics of first year academy physics. I probably know more physics than you do, and my degree's in engineering."

Holly nodded.

"As for these other tests," Ngwane continued, "I'm no guidance counselor, but I'd say you missed your calling. Your aptitude level in computer applications is in the 90th percentile. And the way you took to the computer, just now, I believe it."

"I was always good in computer courses," Holly said. "I'd always take them in order to bring up my grade point average because I got nearly perfect scores."

"Then what'd you go into physics for?"

"I like physics."

Ngwane shrugged. "Pity. I think you'd do well as a records officer or computer technician. If you did well in that, and picked up some science courses on the side, you might even get on the bottom

rung of the promotion ladder for science officer."

"Really? I've always wanted to be a science off...." Holly gasped and put her hands over her mouth. When she felt her face turning red, she moved her hands to cover her cheeks, resting her elbows on the table.

Ngwane eyed her curiously. "Do they have science officers where you come from?"

"Um...well, the concept exists in theory. That is, we have scientist-astronauts who are officers. But we've only made it to our satellite, and the space effort has been stalled for a long time. So they really don't exist in practice."

"But if it did, you'd like to be one, wouldn't you?"

Holly took her hands off her face and nodded, smiling.

Ngwane smiled back. "Tell you what. If we can't send you back, just tell the resettlement people at Starbase 5 that you want to enlist."

"Resettlement?"

"Yes. That's the agency that takes care of people who are displaced for one reason or another."

So there was a Home for Wayward Aliens. "That's me, all right."

"After you go through basic, they'll evaluate your skills to see where you'll go. If you're academy material, they'll recommend you. If not, I'm sure they'll recommend you for technical training."

"Thanks." Holly adjusted her glasses. "Oh. Will they take me with these?"

"Can it be corrected?"

"Dr. McCoy says so."

"They'll take you."

"What about language?"

"We have people from over 80 member planets enlisting in Starfleet every day. You can't be any newer to Interlang than most of the rest of them."

Holly reached across the table, taking Ngwane's arm with both hands and shaking it vigorously. "Thanks. I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"You're welcome," Ngwane said with a smile as Holly released her arm. "Just

returning a favor."

The bosun's whistle sounded. "Will Ms. Svoboda check in with the bridge, please." Holly grinned; she knew that voice!

Ngwane held up a hand to Holly while reaching with the other to touch the console. "Ngwane here. She's with me, Commander."

"Captain wants Ms. Svoboda to report to his quarters."

"On our way, Commander. Ngwane out." She touched the panel again. "Come on," she said to Holly. "I'll drop you off on my way back to engineering."

Holly strode past Ensign Perez into the office area of the Captain's cabin. They were where she had first seen them: Kirk, with Spock on his right and McCoy at his left, sitting at his desk. Kirk, with a gesture, invited her to sit. This time she walked over to sit in the chair next to Spock.

"I trust you've been enjoying yourself, Ms. Svoboda?" asked Kirk.

"Very much so, Captain," said Holly. "Thank you."

"Good. Our engineers have made a further study of the mechanism. They think they've pinpointed the area it took you from."

"However," added Spock, "we are not certain which way the controls work. The sequence we have discovered will either return you to whatever you came from, or it will bring something up from there to here."

"In which case, we'll simply reverse the sequence to send you back."

"After that, we intend to dismantle the mechanism for further study."

Holly smiled to herself. This exchange was beginning to sound precisely like scripted dialogue.

"In any event, you won't be bothered by us any more, Ms. Svoboda," said Kirk.

"Captain," said Holly, tracing circles on the desk with a finger, "would it be possible for me to stay here instead?"

"What?" said McCoy.

The three men exchanged glances with each other, then looked over at Holly. Finally, Kirk said, "Ms. Svoboda, life here must be very different from what you're used to. You might like what you see right here,

but there's much more to this universe than that--things you might not like at all."

Holly grinned. Kirk exchanged a puzzled glance with McCoy.

"Surely you have commitments, familial or professional, which you are obligated to fulfill," said Spock.

Her parents. Yes, Holly Svoboda, MIA. She'd forgotten that. "All right. Just tell me what I have to do."

She was on deck 7 again. Ensign Perez stood watching her from the curve of the hallway. He consulted a tricorder of his, then called out, "Engaging now, Ms. Svoboda."

Holly looked toward the wall. There was a shimmer of light. Two forms solidified--Ginny and Dena. Holly tossed her head back, laughing as they surveyed the corridor.

"Oh, wow. Say, someone was really busy here," said Ginny.

"The least they could've done was to tell the concom they were constructing this here. I'm going to have the hotel management breathing down my neck when they see this," said Dena, waving her thin arms in frustration.

Ensign Perez walked up. Dena and Ginny, both a head taller than he was, blinked in amazement. "The captain wants you to return to his quarters while they recharge for another try," he said.

"Hey, that's a really great costume," said Ginny, rapping on the armor with her knuckles. "Did you make it yourself?"

"What do you mean, 'the captain wants you to return to his quarters'? And what are you going to recharge?" asked Dena.

Perez shook his head, brushing Ginny's arm away. "Just come with me, please."

"Sure," said Ginny, winking at Dena and Holly. When they got into the turbo-lift, Ginny pointed at the wall diagram. "Hey, just like on the *Enterprise*."

"Gack!" said Dena as the lift started up. She fell against Ginny; both of them tumbled to the floor.

"It's not bad once you get used to it," said Holly, smiling down at them.

Holly led the way into the captain's quarters.

"Hey, it's Kirk and Spock and McCoy," said Ginny, stopping at the office entrance.

"How...?" began Kirk.

"Indeed. May I direct your attention to the design on the young woman's clothing," said Spock.

Holly looked over at Ginny. Of course, an *Enterprise* t-shirt.

Dena tugged at Holly's sleeve. "Is this for real, or is it some kind of gag?"

"What do you think it is?" asked McCoy.

"I always thought it was a TV show," volunteered Ginny.

"TV show?" asked Kirk.

"Um...video?" suggested Holly.

Spock leaned in Kirk's direction. "Like R'lerek of Sigma Draconis."

Kirk nodded and rubbed his chin. "Yes...."

"That's someone I haven't heard of before," said Ginny.

"R'lerek was a famous psychic and novelist on Sigma Draconis III," said Kirk. "He could 'see' into other universes. His novels were considered works of fiction until the *Essex* ventured into a parallel universe and found people and conditions there almost precisely as R'lerek had described in his works."

"There were, of course, a few minor variations, but the facts were essentially correct," said Spock.

Kirk extended an arm. "Please, sit down."

"Where have I heard that line before," Ginny murmured in Holly's ear as they took seats around the table.

"I see why you didn't say anything about this before, Ms. Svoboda. We...," began Kirk, as the bosun's whistle sounded. "Excuse me. Viewer on," he said, turning to face the screen. Scott's face appeared.

"Hey, it's Scotty!" Ginny said. Kirk turned to look at her. "Oh, sorry," she amended.

"Yes, go ahead, Mr. Scott," said Kirk, facing the screen again.

"We're havin' a wee bit of trouble with the recharging process, Captain," said Scott.

"Just a minute, Scotty, we'll continue this conversation on the bridge. Viewer off. Spock, McCoy," he said, nodding to the men. As they got out of their chairs, Kirk turned to the women. "We should be back shortly. If you'll excuse us?"

After the door closed, Dena swung around to face Holly. "Where are we?" she asked.

"As far as I can tell, this is a parallel universe, and this is a real *Enterprise*," said Holly.

"Great. How do we get back?" said Dena.

"They're working on it," said Holly. "There's a device on the planet below that seems to be something like the Guardian. As soon as they get it recharged, they'll send you back."

"What do you mean, 'you'?" said Dena.

"I mean," said Holly, taking out a notebook, a pen, and a bankbook from her purse, "that I'm going to give you a note and a check to mail to my parents when you get back. I'm staying here." She began to write.

"You can't be serious," said Dena.

"No offense, but are you sure they'll take a nearsighted asthmatic?" asked Ginny.

"Dr. McCoy already took care of my allergies, and he says that my vision can be corrected by routine surgery," Holly replied, still writing.

"Wow, that's some trick," said Ginny.

"But what can you do here?" protested Dena.

Holly kept her eyes on the paper. "I'll clean latrines if I have to, but I'm told I have a good chance of getting into Starfleet."

"Even if they accept you into Starfleet, there's no guarantee that you'll be assigned to the *Enterprise*," said Dena. "And even if you do, there's no guarantee that Kirk, Spock, or McCoy will be here when they're ready to assign you."

"Did you see them, Dena," said Holly, raising her pen in the direction of the door. "Did they look over the hill to you?"

"No, but...," said Dena.

"Now that you mention it, they did

look pretty chipper," said Ginny.

"Look, I'm not a Kirk, Spock, or McCoy fan in particular; I'm a Star Trek fan. I want to live in the Star Trek universe, with a real Federation, real Klingons, real Gorns, and real Romulans, even if it means going back to their Earth and never getting on a starship again.

"But how long will it be before you get tired of collecting garbage?" said Dena.

"Yeah, and here the Klingons probably really shoot at you, too," added Ginny.

"So what? I can get shot at back on our world, too."

"But you'll be an alien here. Sooner or later you're going to want to go home," said Dena, spreading her arms on the table in appeal.

"Probably. But not as much as I'd long for this place if I were back there," said Holly. She raised her pen, assuming a tutorial posture. "'No decision goes wholly unregretted,' Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Darkover* books." Then a thought occurred to her; she sat back in the chair, chuckling to herself.

"What's so funny?" said Ginny.

Holly caught her breath, leaning forward to spread her hands flat on the table. "Look," she said, speaking with mock decorum, "I want this. As much as Kirk wanted the *Enterprise*, I want this!" She finished her speech by slapping the table.

Ginny groaned.

"You're crazy!" said Dena.

Just then, the three men returned. From the office doorway, Kirk nodded in their direction and said, "Ladies, we're ready to send you back now."

"All right," said Holly, folding the papers in front of her. She stood up with Ginny and Dena, walked over to Dena, and pushed the papers into her pants pocket. "The address of my parents is in there. I don't have any envelopes with me, but there are some stamps in my wallet."

"If you decide to stay, there will be no going back," said Spock.

"I realize that, sir, and all that goes with it, believe me," said Holly.

"Holly, I don't want to do this," said Dena.

"Please, Dena, otherwise my parents won't know what happened to me."

"Do you think they'll believe you?" asked Ginny.

Holly shrugged. "I used general terms." She turned to Dena. "Please send the things, Dena."

"I'll send the letters, yes; it's just that I don't want you to go so that I'll have to send them."

Holly hugged Dena, patting her on the back. "I know; I'll miss you, too."

McCoy turned to Kirk. "Jim, you can't let her stay here."

"I can't very well say she doesn't know what she's getting into."

Ginny walked up and hugged Holly. "Take care of yourself, kid."

"I will."

Kirk turned to look behind him. "Ensign Perez, will you escort these two ladies to deck 7, please?"

Holly sat watching the office viewer as Ginny and Dena appeared, then dissolved with a shimmer.

*

Some years later, Svoboda walked onto the bridge of the *Enterprise* to present her credentials to Admiral Kirk. "Lieutenant Svoboda reporting for duty, sir," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

Kirk eyed her curiously. "Have we met before, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir; I'm from the universe where all this is a work of fiction, remember?"

"Oh, yes," he said, and smiled. "How have you been getting along, Lieutenant?"

Svoboda handed him the record viewer. "You can see for yourself, sir, if you wish." She touched a hand to her temple, a gesture not quite forgotten even though there were no longer glasses there to adjust. She smiled, remembering.

"Let's see..." Kirk said, nodding as he looked into the viewer. "You went through the academy in three years--well, that's not unusual for an older student with previous education. Then a records officer aboard the *Phoenix*, senior physicist aboard the *Yorktown*...looks as if you've had a few commendations, too. And now, assistant science officer here."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk handed the viewer back to her. "Any regrets, Lieutenant?"

Svoboda shrugged. "Oh, a few, sir. But I can honestly say I've never been happier in my life."

"Good. You may go to your post, Lieutenant; welcome aboard."

"Thank you, sir." Svoboda walked to a turbolift door, smiling as she turned to look out over the bridge. She wondered if any sequels had been made, and, if so, if she were in any of them. She stepped inside the lift, letting the doors close behind her.

The human adventure was, indeed, just beginning.



Your editors asked for a "Mirror, Mirror" story. They got it. Actually, it's another Trek episode as it might have been done in the mirror universe. Don't read the title at the bottom until you finish the story, OK? I want to see if you can guess the episode.

The SOS signal had attracted the *ESS Enterprise* the way a panicky swimmer's thrashing attracts a shark.

70 Ophiucus had been settled by a colony of dissidents, "volunteers" in the early, experimental days of spaceflight. Nothing had been heard from them since landfall, and the planet had been written off the habitable lists. Now, however, there was evidence that someone had survived, and James T. Kirk hungered for the glory of reclaiming the "lost" colony for the Empire.

As the *Enterprise* approached, though, the mechanical nature of the signal became clear. There was no response to demands for information, none of the usual signs of organized human activity on the planet's surface. Kirk ordered a landing party to investigate the disappearance of the earlier inhabitants and evaluate the resources available to the Empire.

The first report confirmed the emptiness of the city they had beamed down to. Subsequent communications, however, revealed the reason for the SOS call. Experiments in genetic engineering had gotten out of hand. A virus intended to prolong life had proved successful--as long as the subject did not undergo puberty. The hormonal changes of that period unbalanced the viral biochemistry and left the victim susceptible to a secondary infection that caused madness and death. The earliest

symptom of the disease was the appearance of bluish blotches on the skin. One of the security team had already broken out in blue.

Doctor McCoy had the team send the research records up for analysis by the *Enterprise's* main computer. A quick scan told him there was a possibility of working to the problems with the life prolongation virus, and the spirochete that caused the secondary effects would make an excellent biological weapon. He did not, however, believe it necessary to strain the sickbay systems to isolate and produce an antitoxin for the landing party. He recommended quarantine procedures until Empire laboratories could develop the vaccine that would protect the new colonists.

On the bridge, Kirk nodded when he heard McCoy's recommendations. He was glad he had assigned Rand to the group--he had tired of her constant plotting--and the security teams were always involved in intrigues. He ordered the phasers locked onto the city and the surrounding built-up areas. With practiced precision, the fire control teams carried out the antiseptic operation.

The *Enterprise* resumed her former course, seeking new worlds to conquer, new life to subdue, and glory for her Captain and the Empire.

Could you guess? I call the story...

"Miri, Miri"

by Sheryl Adsit

Darth and the Directors' Guild

Linda Boster

"Yes, my master?" Darth knelt in subservience to the Emperor. His mind raced with the possibilities of what this meeting might portend. He knew things had not gone well since the loss of Skywalker as prisoner/protege. It was odd, he mused, behind the gravity, the Emperor's voice sounded almost playful.

"There is an assignment we feel you are ably suited to. Having taken your past record into account, we feel that you are the one to put a halt to the recent upsurge of rebel sympathy we've uncovered.

"Yes, my master." He deepened his bow, his head nearly brushing the floor tiles. Whatever this so-called appointment was, it made him feel uneasy.

"There is a small planet on the outer rim of our great galaxy. These people are notoriously backward. However, a deviously clever rebel advance man has penetrated their midst. He holds a supremely important position. His every command is obeyed without question..." The Emperor paused, seeing Darth's confusion as to his part in this plot. He waited a moment longer, savoring the discomfort.

"It will be a great service to the Empire. We are sending you to infiltrate this mighty organization of theirs. You must stop this infusion of rebels by any means available to you. Their cause has been accepted and digested into everyday life!" The tone of his voice grew more serious as he involved himself in the tale.

Darth started to rise from his crouch. The pace of his thoughts was furious. What would be expected of him, how was he to be presented. He shifted, barely noticeably, and remained in his posture of obeisance.

"You will, of course, adapt yourself with appliances to appear to be native. They are an easily prejudiced race in these terms." The joviality returned to

his voice. "Come now, Vader, arise. Surely you can handle such a menial task."

* * *

"Ladies and gentlemen. First, I'd like to thank you for the prestigious honor of electing me your leader. I am deeply grateful to you and will in every way uphold the by-laws and traditions of this mighty guild..." He raised his hands in an attempt to bring the applause under control.

"I feel we must get directly to the point. We have a member who is, at this moment, tearing out the heart of our institution and our traditions. He is a man who appears to support us, yet corrupts the people around him. This man must be stopped." He paused long enough to allow the crowd to murmur their agreement. Then raised his arms once more for silence.

"The man I speak of is George Lucas...a member in good standing. However, now he's overstepped the bounds. He has become too filled with his own importance. He ignores our traditions...."

The speaker rubbed his eyes and the crowded room watched in awe. Of course he was right. Lucas must pay. You could just see how much thought, how much emotion had gone into the speaker's words. Just look at the weary eyes, the pale complexion. It was taking as much out of their leader to fine this outstanding director as it would have if he'd had to castigate himself. They felt much admiration.

He watched the crowd and judged their attitude. The Force has a strong influence on the weak-minded. He rubbed his eyes again, and thought how glad he'd be to get out of this ridiculously uncomfortable costume and back to the comfort of his respirator.

This being the year of the Republic 2'6046, Midyears Day,
in the season of Lategreen, in Vista, on Whillhome

This being the Saga of the Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi of Ves of the Alderaan
Enclave as related by Taleteller Lorleyneesi of the whillum Ylatic

That Share of Glory

The Uncles

In the 2'6011th year of Republican History, a boy child was born into the merchant allya Kenobi of the Centerworld Ves. He was bright, inquisitive, and rich in his inheritance of raw, forceful gifts from ancestors well known among the Jedi.

But it was not his fate to easily follow those before him. His mother, knowing in her own soul the conceits such power can fall prey to, was wary of the great skills she watched develop in her son; his father, remembering the price his family had already paid in Jedi dead, worried over the boy's safety and the continuation of his family line in the allya.

Together, the parents worked to narrow the pathways of life open to young Obi-wan Kenobi. When he wandered too often to the Ves Enclave doors, when his Jedi uncle ignored his mother's admonitions to let the boy be, when his talents shone too brightly to disregard, Wreyn Emarie and Arde-wan Kenobi took their son away with them to space to learn the business of the allya Kenobi, to become a trader in the art of fine jewelry

And because of their decision, it came to be that the family was on Hala in '6018 when the Sith Dark Lord Vert Darman sent his legions to pillage there. Wreyn Emarie died that day, defying a forceful Sith lord, bidding her son to save his own life through powers she knew he had.

Flee the boy did, but into more fearsome netherlands than one wiser might have trod. In his father's arms again, he still wandered the Otherness of the force, blinded by the light too brilliant for waking eyes, overwhelmed by the dark too powerful for weakened souls.

Fear was in Obi-wan's heart and in Arde-wan's eyes when the Jedi came to heal. In that fear, the child buried the memories of forceful ways; from that fear, the father drew the strength to vow such memories would never return.

Here follows the tale of *The Uncles* wherein all wishes, either for aye or nay, must bend to free choice and its consequences.



A
THOUSANDWORLDS
CHRONICLES
STORY

Maggie Nowakowska

PART ONE

Alderaan, 6019

Allyn Emarie was anxious, impatient, driven by a premonition that if it were not already too late to alter the pattern of one small boy's life, it soon would be. Four days had passed since Emarie's sister's last rites; the time for quiet reflection was nearly over. Soon her husband would leave with the special child Wreyn Emarie had birthed; soon all ties with Alderaan, the Jedi ties her husband so distrusted, would be severed.

He had to chance one last talk with his brother-in-law. He had to convince Arde-wan that Obi's future was here, on Alderaan, with his Emarie uncle, with the Alderaan Jedi Enclave.

If he failed, Allyn Emarie knew he would not see his nephew again for many years.

He found Kenobi on a balcony overlooking the back court of the Emarie family home. A lawn, bright green with spring growth, stretched away from the stone stairs nearby, sloping gently to the River of Eio. Family children, dressed in the colors of newly blooming flowers, played on the grass, running, shouting, tumbling with pats. Allyn stood silently by Arde-wan and watched his nephew chase after a cousin, two dashes of gold and scarlet amidst the green. The boy seemed so happy and energetic, so different from the pale shadow of life Kenobi had brought to Alderaan a scant week before. Emarie rejoiced at how quickly Obi-wan had taken to the Jedi healing techniques, marveling yet once more at the powers the boy could summon.

"The resilience of the young," he heard Kenobi murmur as a stormy wash of sorrow swirled through the Vessan's aura. Allyn reached out in sympathy, but peals of laughter rang up the stairs from the lawn, a clarion of giggles that cleared their minds of bleakness with a ringing lilt that was Wreyn Emarie reborn.

"She lives on in him, Arde."

"Yes," Kenobi agreed with an intensity that was only slightly less than a promise. "He will live...and she in him."

"Ah--I am still worried about Obi, Arde. His physical recovery from the Healing is more than satisfactory, of course, but... Arde, as cheerful as that boy looks now, I can't help but worry about his psychological state. The Healers didn't want his mind wiped clean of what happened on Hala. I know they saw to it that the memory remained. But now...now he's suddenly oblivious to his experience, even

to the Healing. He turns a blank stare on me if I mention the attack, Wreyn, or the Jedi."

"Then don't mention them."

"Arde, it's as if he's taken it upon himself to completely forget, and that isn't healthy! He has to remember the dark, too."

"No."

"Arde!"

"Let him forget." Kenobi's clear cerulean eyes darted about, matching his son's antics. "Your part in this--the Jedi's part--is over. No more tricks, no more spells and trances; no more half-dreaming." He paused; the long face hardened and the sweeping Kenobi jaw set. "I will carry the memories for both of us. It will be enough."

"Arde, it is not enough! He must--"

"He must not!"

Arde-wan would not look at Emarie; no, he would not waste one precious moment away from his son simply to answer an obstinate Jedi. He gripped the balcony railing painfully tight, as if the engraven metal could impart its strength through him to mend his broken heart. For a breath, he envied Obi-wan this forceful peace. *Wreyn!* A quick kiss, a flirting glance cast over her shoulder as she walked away; his fleeting thought to abandon business and follow after her, his decision not to. These were all he had left after Hala: memories, and Obi-wan.

He stopped the sob deep in his throat and shook off the Jedi's hand of concern. Arde-wan knew why his wife had died on Hala's moon; he knew what Wreyn had been capable of, what her brother's hopes had been for her before she married. Through the boy's memories, now mercifully locked away, the Jedi had seen Wreyn's powerful defense against the skilled and jealous Sith captain, her defeat by him, her death. Now they--these Jedi!--wanted Arde-wan to sacrifice his only child as Wreyn had been; as Arde-wan's aunt and uncle had been. *No!* The Vessan swore. *No more Kenobis on the rolls of Jedi dead.*

Tomorrow, they would go; tomorrow and not a moment too soon. With the sunrise they would leave this old dangerous life behind and start over. Far away from Wreyn's resting ground, far away from temptation and Jedi, they would begin again.

Allyn gripped the railing himself,

knowing his sympathy was dimming, struggling with his temper to keep at least the line of familial friendship open with Kenobi.

"Well, Allyn? You must have something more to say. You always do."

"Jelana. She's still asking whether you'll reconsider leaving Obi with her and Frayl."

"I didn't think your family would let up on that request."

"Arde, your parents aren't well and your brother is impossible. We're his closest relatives; everyone else on Ves is a second cousin at least. Here he'd have agemates to play with, an upbringing and education unmatched in the galaxy. Leave him, Arde, with his nearest cousins, with his aunt and uncle."

"Oh yes, with his uncle. And what about his other uncle and all that uncle's Jedi friends?" Kenobi looked away from the children to Emarie for the first time. "I don't think so, Allyn. Obi will have agemates on the *Serene Star*, too. He'll have the galaxy for his schoolroom. And he'll have his father. His father, Allyn. Guidance enough, I should think."

"Guidance! Arde, that boy needs more guidance than you or your ship or all the businessers in the universe could ever dream exists!" Allyn dearly wanted to shout at Kenobi, to shake the man until his fears rattled free. In fact, he did shout. "Kenobi, that boy has abilities beyond your--beyond my--understanding! Think of Obi-wan for once! If you find these powers difficult to live with, imagine what the boy will feel when he tries to use the Force that way again!"

"He will not--"

"Oh yes, he will! He will, Arde. He will." Emarie struggled with his emotions, knowing he should calm himself, trying to calm himself. He dropped back onto his heels from the straining, tip-toe stance he had taken before the taller man. "We both know Obi. He'll do anything he perceives he can do."

"If he has forgotten--"

"Not forever, Arde! One day, some day, he'll use some small power all folk know, and he'll remember."

"If he isn't encouraged--"

"By all the gods-- Arde, you aren't listening! The Force exists for everyone to tap, but your boy was born with the keys to the whole wine cellar! It is our responsibility--yours and mine, Arde--to see that he knows how to handle his vintage of talent, that he knows the good and the

bad of it. He needs to be taught!"

"He needs his father."

"Who is turning him against the abilities that saved him."

"I haven't said a word to him," Kenobi snapped. "If he avoids you now, it's of his own doing."

"He's--"

"He's a bright child, Allyn; you're right. And it doesn't take much intellect to learn to be afraid, does it?"

The Jedi needed no forceful talents to know the wall between him and the man was impenetrable. He leaned again on the railing, his head dropping slightly between his broad Alderaani shoulders. "Arde," he said, his voice tight with determination, "Obi needs a special education; he needs to learn the way of life so that he may make a reasonable, and difficult, choice one day."

But Kenobi was hardly listening. He fastened his tunic at his shoulder with a heavy brooch, its jewel encased with filigree formed into the allya Kenobi corporate t'mark. "He will have the best Center can offer," Kenobi commented, fussing with some difficulty in the pin's catch. "That should be sufficient."

"In the matter of the Force, it was already insufficient when he was five."

"In matters of the Force, he needs no further knowledge." The Vessan stepped down a stair, one foot still on the landing. He looked back at the Jedi with a great show of patience. "Not to properly run the Company, Allyn, which is what Obi will do."

Emarie pushed himself away from the rail and stood full-faced before Kenobi again, his face reddened with anger. "My nephew will not be some petty merchant throwing pretty trinkets at spoiled aristocrats and rich courtiers when he could be doing something important and respectful!"

"Jedi, you forget yourself!"

Emarie froze. He swore, he cursed himself and his intemperance to the coldest pits on Xet. He gave Kenobi the moment, and the next, to rebuke him, quietly suffering the scorn in his brother-in-law's eyes.

After a while, Kenobi turned away. He cupped his hands about his mouth, a watergem ring on his finger catching the sunlight and casting rainbows on his sleeve, and whistled a trilling call across the lawn. On the grass below, the dark-haired boy with skinny Vessan limbs and an

Alderaan barrel chest skidded to a halt, rolling into a last tumble with a cousin. "Your powers blind you, Allyn," Kenobi observed as the children disentangled themselves. "You don't see the danger, only the glory."

"The need, Arde, the need we all have for such as him."

"Whatever."

"You can't change what he is, you know. Not even for his safety."

Kenobi repeated his summons until he saw his son make last farewells. "He will be what he learns," Arde-wan said, turning away. He walked down the stairs into the full sunlight and collected his son.

Emarie did not see him again.

* * *

PART II

Rynan, 6025, Third Fifth

Obi-wan had been on Rynan many times before, but never at the Academy; he had never felt any pressing need to visit then and still didn't. Reminding himself that the Space Academy was a more interesting place to be than the furthest--and most primitive--reaches of Far Sector, which were next on the *Serene Star's* itinerary, he tried to concentrate instead on the waves below the hydrofoil that carried him to the isles of Ka. If he had really had a choice...

He sighed and reshifted his weight, letting go of the ship's railing with his hands, resting his chest on the rounded metal so his arms could dangle freely in the mist. He told himself he didn't care one way or the other what happened in the coming year, that such decisions were best left to Per. He didn't quite believe it.

In the name of Formax, he grumbled, examining his arms and legs critically, *why does he want to make a wall-eyed hangar-hack out of me?* Obi-wan thought about his last stay on Brokaw and the sidetrips his tutor and he had made to Skylan and Whillhum. There the talk had been of history, story-songs, people of a thousand worlds and a hundred thousand ways of living. There he had wrestled with questions that had no answers, puzzles in which he had found an odd exhilaration of spirit. He had even spoken with Jedi, which he hadn't done since...and though their close presence made him catch his breath with anxiety, Obi-wan now felt an almost unbearable eagerness for his promised tour of Urt where a great

Enclave was.

But that was two years away, after the Academy, after time on Om amid the bureaucracy of Center, after these "growing experiences" his father insisted on with the firm set to his jaw that told Obi-wan any further discussion was useless. Leaning further forward, Obi-wan peered over his legs at his feet, which were too big these days, like his arms which were too long and awkward. On Skylan, he had begun to wonder if he were really in his rightful body, so strong had the sense of dislocation with his normal life been there; and upon his further examination of the body Kenobi, had decided a trade-in would not be such a bad idea.

His father assured him such doubts were normal at thirteen almost fourteen.

The shuttle horn hooted, answered in kind by the PierControl on Ka. Any other day, Obi-wan would have appreciated the seaborne tones, so like the lonely fogchimes on Brokaw, but the memory only made him more cross. If Phasswhego were there, the Orcan would most likely tell him it was a romantic sound and go off forever about the trip back to Orca for Phassi's first mating run; Galreath would probably lecture him on the legal ramifications of such traditions. Obi-wan's scowl deepened; he wished that he and his shipmates were back on the *Serene Star* together; that trips to Orca, to prelaw universities, to Ryllan Space Academies were still in the province of adult talk. Growing experiences--starfields!

Back in the main cabin, his father sat with the Academy regent who had facilitated Obi-wan's entry to Academic ranks. The Hovite's voice boomed as Obi-wan came into the room, including him in the assurances to Arde-wan that the processing procedures, really, would be no trouble at all. Obi-wan shrugged politely. He certainly expected there would be no fuss; that would only add insult to injury. He sat at the far end of the cabin and gnawed a knuckle as the vessel docked.

Whatever the political and social pressures that could be placed upon the Academy regarding early entrants, no student survived without expending a great deal of energy in study. For the first time in his schooling, Obi-wan knew he faced a difficult year.

True to the Regent's claim, the necessary compwork was over quickly, leaving time for a complimentary tour of the main campus. Obi-wan dawdled behind his father and the Hovite, letting his thoughts wander. He fancied himself a drifting cloud, looking down on all these landbound creatures working at conquering the sky, laughing as he floated unfettered by anyone, save the wind. He unfastened his tunic as

he ambled in the tropical sunlight, tugging at the sleeves absently. From afar, he heard a man clearing his throat, once, then twice; then he was certain his father called. Drifting back to land again, Obi-wan glanced about for Arde-wan, but his father was quite a bit away with the Regent who was jabbering on about something.

Obi-wan frowned, wondering if he had imagined the summons. Then his father definitely did gesture at him, angrily in fact, and the message was that Obi-wan was to remain properly dressed. Obi-wan sighed with great exaggeration in answer, but Arde-wan was adamant, allowing no more than a modest unfastening of the tunic's chestpiece.

Obi-wan began to consider the advantages of skipping supervision for a whole year.

Somewhere on the third level of the Engineering Tower, he fell behind the tour once again. Balconies and catwalks wrapped about this arc of the building, allowing a full view of the smallcraft landing fields to the south, and by balancing his hips against a cross-bracing, arms stiffened, feet barely brushing the walkway, Obi-wan could lean over far enough to watch the activity below.

He saw five ships being eased out of the hangars, oddly shaped ships, designed like a cross between a Y-wing and paired poles. He stretched his neck as far as he could, but the vessels quickly slid out of view under nearby rigging. Curious, Obi-wan dropped back on his feet, crooked his arm around the rail and slid off the balcony onto the interlaced metal that extended from it. With the sureness of a shipbred spacer, he scrambled to the edge for a better look. He caught a glimpse of the poletips, but something--he wasn't certain what, something like a tap on the shoulder or a noise in the distance--made him look sharply to the left.

A man stepped out of the hangars, a man who was muscular and tall and authoritative, a man who didn't simply walk across the field but whose every stride conquered the ground covered. From under his ledge, Obi-wan could see cadets running, catching sight of the man, then skidding to a respectful stop. He leaned forward as far as he dared, holding on to a crossrod with one hand, fascinated by the authority which so demanded the students'--and his--attention. There was a sort of energy about the man, a vibrancy Obi-wan had felt before on Skyland...

The man stopped, spun around, encompassing the students with a dramatic sweep of his arm. The gesture startled Obi-wan; it seemed to include him in its scope and he suddenly did not want to be so

embraced. He reared back nervously and his boot caught a bracing. Perhaps it clanged, perhaps he exclaimed out loud when he slipped slightly. Whatever the reason, the man glanced up sharply, his face no longer shadowed but seemingly fairer than the sunlight upon it, his eyes clearly crimson though he stood over ten meters away.

Obi-wan could not move. He was paralyzed, mesmerized, by the gaze of the man below. His back pressed hurtfully against the girders; his heart beat hard enough to match the pain; his breath became ragged. He searched frantically within himself for the reason this was happening--what was happening?--but his thoughts were stunted by his growing panic. He saw the man step forward, hesitate, then raise a hand. A touch that was not real, a will that was not his own, reached Obi-wan, cushioning him where there was no railing, holding him securely against a deadly fall.

He was certain he screamed. He must have screamed; the sound reverberated in his head as his vision unfocused and the air about him turned dark, while somewhere that was not here a body that was not quite his scrambled away from a dark man with fiery eyes who reached out for him--

"No!" It was Per's voice, his father's sharp, defiant voice that he used to rout the fears that assaulted him. No! He shouted at his memories as he swung about on the railing, away from the grasping Other. Banging his head on steel, he grabbed at the reality of this pain to help banish the phantom hurts.

The strangeness passed. On his back he could feel the hot Ryllan sun again, breaking through the void of uncertainty, melting it like mist. Obi-wan breathed more easily once the passageways of memory were shut, but the shock of such childhood nightmares bursting into his waking mind lingered. And he dared not worry the problem further; he had never quite forgotten the emptiness vaster than space, a sense of Wrong more enduring than time, that waited, watched for him. He had had to fight it back from his sleep years before; he was not about to give it passageway to the day now.

He could hear the cadets' calling warnings and flushed with embarrassment. What would Per say if he came out and saw? Obi-wan quickly began to work his way back to safer ground.

He wobbled slightly once, but an unseen push back to security was swift in coming, as was the warning his mind's-ear heard: *//Take care, younger, lest you fall!//*

Obi-wan cut off the voice. He refused it, he rejected it. He scrambled onto the walkway as curiosity wafted after

him. For a moment, the concern touched his heart sweetly, reminding him of--he clamped down on his senses and the moment passed.

Just beyond the glass doors, Obi-wan saw his father looking about impatiently, and he hurried inside again.

Talk at dinner was almost too lively for the rest of the clientele in the sedate dining room of the Callameloda Club. Arde-wan had to hush his fellow businessers more than once, but each time the noise escalated. The Sith Incursions had ended barely two years before; the Dark Lord Vert Darmen was utterly defeated and those who had taken his family's place on Xet were anxious for peace. As the climate on that fearsome planet worsened, the chance for conquest passed, and a long millennium of war ended. Throughout the galaxy, peoples years-wary relaxed, and in the galactic corporate world that depended on the prosperity of peace, spirits soared.

"To the Vaders!" One of the Jesserans raised her glass in toast. "May the frost on their armor never thaw!"

Crystal raised high, the party echoed R'Yellen's sentiments. Amidst laughter and frivolity, the conversation bubbled on, mostly of business, often of travel and curious happenings. These were the businessers who knew space as well as their bank accounts; who ran their affairs from their yachts, facing the difficulties of alien commerce in person, leaving the intrigues of Center for others.

"You're quiet tonight, Obi," another Jesseran observed when the dinner had progressed to its second serving of cheese and brandy. "Arde, are you certain he's not pouting because he can't go back with us to Far Sector?"

"Ser R'Testyo, I just--"

"R'Testyo, right about now I'd wager there's nowhere else he'd rather be going," Arde-wan interrupted, a wry smile on his lips. "I thought he was gloomy just over the idea of the Academy; you should have seen him after our tour of the place. You see, gentleones, my son never gives up a fight easily, and this is his way of making certain I know his displeasure."

Obi-wan could not resist the challenge. "If a year at heavy physics and cross-eyed computer programming is what a person has to go through just to insure some Corellian mechanic doesn't rob him blind on ship repairs...I'll take the bill, thank you."

"Hfft," sniffed Phasswhego's father, sitting next to Arde-wan. "You won't say that when you're the one paying

the robbers your credits."

"Perhaps not," Obi-wan conceded, "but what I say then will probably be kinder than what Per says when he gets my statement from the Academy accountants a year from now."

"All right, all right, Obi," Arde-wan called out over his friends' hearty laughter. "You can go back to being morose now."

"Thirteen isn't a day too early to ship 'em out, eh, Arde?" the Bestinian broker, Day Daiv, declared.

"Fourteen," Obi-wan injected, "on Midyear."

"Don't listen to Day, Obi," the female Jesseran countered. "Take advantage of these years; you're only a youngster once."

"Someone tell that to Ende-deuc!" her husband crowed. Arde-wan threw up his hands in exaggerated dismay at the mention of his brother, but the businessser could not be kept from telling the latest rumors about the wayward Kenobi scion.

Glad for the switch in attention to a half-remembered uncle, Obi-wan sat back and let the party continue without him. Exhausted after the trip to Ka, he had tried to nap, but sleep wouldn't come. Not that he was so much tired as over-extended, worn out, vanquished. Yes, he would go to the Academy. The papers had been signed, the tuition transferred. He was resigned to learning how to stay one step ahead of some future item in the Company's overhead program. One more beginning, like so many others. He wondered if there was anything in his life that didn't start and end as abruptly as a school term.

His father caught his eye with a concerned glance that Obi-wan dispelled with a slight yawn. Arde-wan smiled, his chuckle blending unnoticed into the boisterousness of their companions. He tipped his glass of cortac at Obi-wan in a silent, affectionate salute, and Obi-wan returned the same.

A storm was riding the winds out of Rynan's turbulent northern seas, bringing the only touch of night the civilized island ever knew on that ancient planet, long frozen in its single, yearly rotation. The crowd awaiting the last shuttle to Ka was silent as it watched the rising sea and incoming clouds.

Arde-wan slid his arm around his son's shoulders and was heartened when Obi-wan did not shy away, but leaned closer instead, his head touching Arde-wan's side ever so slightly. Kenobi knew his son's

unhappiness, had been painfully touched by Obi-wan's strange mood all day. He did not like leaving behind such a personal storm of distress.

A whole year! He tightened his grip on the boy. They had never been so long away from each other. Kenobi wondered if it were wise... *Obi might need me, so moody and restless he's been lately...but, Father knows, the boy is old enough...* "I'll miss you, Obi," he said softly, his voice almost lost in the growing wind. The shuttle neared the pier and about them, the crowd shuffled closer. "You need anything, anything at all, you get in touch with Endero-sep at the office here."

"I will, Per."

"And it won't be as if you can't get away from the technical studies here. Remember to visit the Faffstons and the Greetchels; don't worry about your budget if you need to escape to the other islands, either."

"I won't."

The shuttle settled onto the water, its cushion of air disappearing into the choppy ocean waters. The departure warning horn sounded almost immediately; this was its late run to Ka for Primetime students and there would be no layover.

"Per?"

"Yes, Obi?"

But the boy said nothing; instead, he brought his arms about Arde-wan's chest for a quick hug, a hard hug that startled Kenobi with its promise of mature strength to come. Disciplining his tears fiercely, Arde-wan hugged Obi-wan back, kissed his son's hair lightly, then let him go.

It will only be one year, after all.

As a first year student, he would be living on auxiliary time, the second cycle of five measures that made up both the galactic and Rynan's day. Although it was still early in those measures when Obi-wan found his way back to his dormer, he blackened the windows and crawled into bed. He had had too many years' experience adjusting to a multitude of planetary day and night sequences to miscalculate one more adjustment; by the time classes began in mid-week, he would be ready.

The dream came long after he had rested, when his body slept comfortably in the extra measures allowed. It crept up on him, fooling him by beginning on Ves with soft, moist sunshine and the sound of the wind through the trees around his home. In the warmth of the solarium, his cousins and

landfriends drifted about, playing, talking, distracting him from a half-seen figure, a quick and bright phantom that flitted about him always, comforting, teasing, bathing him in care and attention. He turned about and about, seeking the mysterious person, but each time he came around, each time he almost saw who it was, the brightness grew. Soon it was too brilliant to face; he could see nothing at all except a figure that shimmered with sound he could almost remember, and a trembling caress he could almost feel. Frustration wrung a cry from him, and from out of the glow came others who played with him tricks, games, and magic he strained to remember. They spoke with him, these wondrous folk, in his mind, not his ears, and they told him the phantom's name. He cried out again and his Mem hushed his hurts, and as she spoke with him a sweet concern touched his heart--

Like that morning when the man had reached out and touched him in just the same way, a black-clad man with bloody eyes who had turned on his heel and stretched out with a death-filled hand to reach into his Mem's mind and crush his Mem's heart and shut off his Mem's words in his mind forever--

He was instantly awake. Years-old habits took hold, barring the dream further life, wiping its power clean, dissolving its terrors. Obi-wan pulled the warmer closer about himself, up to his neck. If only Per were there to dispel the hauntings! But he wasn't and he wouldn't be, and Obi-wan told himself he didn't want Per to be. He wasn't a child anymore! He wasn't afraid of nightmares, not anymore! Homesick, that's all he was, silly as it sounded. There was no encompassing Dark waiting for him, no overwhelming sense of Wrong.

And if there were, he wouldn't wait around to meet it again.

Low clouds still shadowed Ka when Obi-wan found his way to the dormer cafeteria. The illusion of night brought the glowlamps to their full intensity, casting a golden light on the corridors, warming the rambling dining area more commonly lit in white sunlight from the high, arched windows. The room was nearly empty; Obi-wan's dormer housed first year students only, most of whom were sound asleep by now. Low voices and the sound of compsets came from one corner, though; a recess filled with terminals, disarranged tables and the scattered belongings of a group of students who appeared to have settled in for a long stay. Reluctant to sit alone, but wary of intruding on an obviously established group of friends, Obi-wan set his tray on a table near enough to watch the game of truddelly in progress, yet not close enough to attract attention.

One or two of the folk glanced his way at first, but except for a male human who glanced every so often at Obi-wan, he sat in satisfied obscurity.

When the third set of truddelty began, the young man left the corner, glancing curiously again at Obi-wan as he passed, then staring pointedly when he returned with a fresh pitcher of cavene. "First year?" the young man asked in a somewhat puzzled tone of voice as he sat.

Obi-wan nodded. At the game board, the Y'kshirley player looked up sharply, canted his ears in surprise, then woofed in either disbelief or disgust. Obi-wan wasn't certain which.

"A bit late up for a neo, don't you think?"

"Couldn't sleep. Might take me a few days to acclimate."

"Hey, Ata!"

The student hailed--at least Obi-wan thought it was a student though the etched agemark on the avian's beak gave him pause--was nestled in a corner amidst a scatter of comptapes. She cocked her head in vague attention at the human's call.

"Ata, give me that sheaf of filmnotes. Yeah, those. Thanks." He ruffled through the thin sheets. "Who's your intro law prof?"

"Ah, Eallana Aa, I believe."

Eyebrows rose, the Brokovian rustled her feathers in surprise, and even the Y'kshirley cocked his ears respectfully.

"Hm, not bad for a first year," the student admitted, choosing certain films. "Here, might as well look at this if you're going to be up. And if it doesn't cure your insomnia, at least it'll put you in a proper frame of mind for facing Eallana Aa."

"What frame of mind is that?"

"Properly terrified, whatever your entrance scores."

The dream came again, and again Obi-wan found the same group of folk huddled in the cafeteria corner. He settled nearby, watching silently. With a day on campus behind him, Obi-wan could judge these late-nighters more accurately as last-year students mixed with a few assistant associates of the faculty, folk he could feel comfortable with, like the young managers and traders his father dealt with.

"Of all the ridiculous--will you listen to this, people? I've never heard

such drivel in--bah!" The Ptlmy who had been monitoring a Centerweb newsbriefing, pounded a well-tattooed palm on the console. "I tell you there is no justice. Those contracts between Lucef and Tle are legal and binding and no Senate ruling can supercede them. We didn't survive the Incursions just to exchange Sith tyranny for Aguent price gouging!"

"Down, Wryt," the young man of the night before muttered. "We're just simple mechanics here. The ways of the Worlds are beyond stultified souls such as us." When no one else appeared ready to discuss the issue, the Ptlmy wrapped his long, bony arms about himself in disgust and glared at the monitor.

"Actually, the Senate had no choice," Obi-wan ventured. "The Lucef Airways Management Board had a prior agreement with Aguens regarding tariffs."

"Who...?" The Ptlmy sat up, interested despite his confusion over Obi-wan's identity. "But that was just a war agreement."

Obi-wan shrugged sympathetically. "And Lucef didn't bother to tell Tle there was no completion date."

"Fools!" Wryt exclaimed, cursing his homeworld's twin planet until Ata, the Brokovian, silenced him with an impatient caw.

"And how could you know all this?" she asked Obi-wan.

"A friend of my father's tried to break the Agreement. I sat in on the hearings while visiting on Bestine last fifth."

"Which is why, friends," Ata declared, "our young night-crawler here is in Eallana Aa's class."

"He'll need more than his sire's friends' words to survive that trickster," the Y'kshirley growled. "If she weren't a Jedi..."

"Are there Jedi here?!" Obi-wan pulled his chair closer to the truddelty game table. The canoid, who seemed addicted to the game, barely lifted his attention from the pieces to answer.

"Oh, surely. The war's over, isn't it? Gotta do something with all of them."

"Ignore Oyega," someone advised Obi-wan. "He's just sore that he got assigned to Zadexxet, who's one of the toughest instructors to assist on campus."

"That human has no sense of humor," Oyega complained.

Obi-wan's pleasure at hearing there were Jedi about dimmed slightly. "Zadexxet. Isn't that a Sithian name?"

"Oh, he's Jranikan, only half-Sith," Wryt injected, "though he looks like the Marauder himself. He's a gentle, whatever old Sourmuzzle here thinks."

"And he's a Jedi?"

The young man laughed. "That's his Brokovian side coming out. Zadexxet always says his father was always too fond of his feathered friends and that he inherited his da's high-flying ideas. Don't worry it; he's fine!" When Obi-wan didn't say anything, the young man leaned forward, concerned. "Hey, anything wrong?"

Obi-wan shrugged. "My mother was killed in the Hala attack."

"Oh."

On the third night, he learned their names: Skelt, from Dotar, the young man who had first spoken to him; Wryt, Ata and Oyega, Femeli from Heildie, and Kert of Osia. Despite their class loads and whatever their own studies, they met regularly in the neo cafeteria to relax, and to share the gossip their assistanceships depended on as much as on their talent. They asked after Obi-wan's name that night and included him on some of the gossip, warning him further about his law instructor's stringent exams, preparing him for the trouble he was bound to have about his transient status at the Academy with the Deserate who ran the applied energies sequence. In return, Obi-wan recounted stories of life amidst the trading fleets and more than one tall tale passed on by the *Serene Star's* Corellian second engineer, he of sporadic appearance and frequent final notices.

On the fourth night, the dreams did not come but Obi-wan found his way to the cafeteria again, anyway.

On the fifth night, Oyega asked Obi-wan if by any chance he knew how to play truddelty.

Serene Star
6025.24.01

My dear son,

...I was distressed to read your story of your frightening climb that afternoon we toured the Academy--why didn't you tell me?! That the methods you have always used to dispel these dreams still work gives me some comfort, and I advise you to continue the exercises. I cannot say why

the dreams have come back except to suspect, as you do, the appearance of this unusual Jedi as the trigger. Now, Obi, you must remember that he is Jranikan and not fault him for his heritage, but do avoid him if possible. What is the use of stirring up old feelings? Better to pass by and forget. Perhaps, too, though I resist saying so because you will probably rant at me, the dreams are simply a manifestation of your reluctance to be away from home so long. There, now you are angry at me for insinuating that you are a homesick child. I accept my rebuke with the excuse that I am only your father and prone to such delusions.

My congratulations on your natal day. I hope you can get away to Rylla for a celebration. There should be a package arriving on or about Midyear. I look forward to your next holiday, when I can be there to celebrate with you. For now, I must go; as always, Yverane is bullying me over some appointments.

All my love,

Per

Addendum: Obi, you must tell your friends that you already know more about truddelty than I wish you did. You ought not to take advantage of them; such behavior does not become you. And, no, I do not accept the excuse that they are taking advantage of your purse. One does not buy friends with credits, Obi; nor does one cheat at truddelty...

FOURTH FIFTH

Following his father's advice wasn't difficult, Obi-wan found. Caught up in the rigorous studies demanded by Academy instructors, and in the even more strenuous off-hours activities his association with Skelt and the others required, Obi-wan was too busy for mental wanderings. If it had not been for EaLlana Aa's biweekly reminder that Jedi walked the campus, Obi-wan would have completely forgotten the man with the scarlet eyes. As it was, his law professor was somehow irritated by Obi-wan and not one to inspire further thought on forbidding subjects. If the temptation did arise in bed, Obi-wan rose and studied until too tired to do anything but sleep; if it intruded on class, as sometimes happened during EaLlana Aa's lectures, he employed some sleight of mind he had developed by trial and error, a trick he would have to teach his father one day. However well Arde-wan hid his own feelings, Obi-wan knew his father was sometimes haunted, too.

His campaign to damp any extraordinary perceptions he might have was so successful that when he rounded a corner just down the hall from his navigation theory class late in the fifth, he stepped

smack into Oxxler Zadexxet, Flight Instructor X-class, Jranikan and Jedi.

Obi-wan stumbled back; Zadexxet staggered slightly and the avian at the Jedi's side slid to an unbalanced halt, its wings spread slightly.

"Younger," the Jranikan rumbled in basso. "Are you alone?"

The half-Sith Jedi's presence was petrifying; every muscle in Obi-wan's body strained to run, but he did nothing at all except stare, frozen in place, at the shadowed face and its pale rose eyes.

"I don't understand how I missed..." The Jedi looked down the cross hall toward the lecture hall, then past his companion down the opposite way. "Henke, did you...?" He turned back to study Obi-wan. "I know you, don't I?"

No, shook Obi-wan's head. He felt it move, but could not tell if he had ordered it to do so. Once again, his body belonged to another; once again, the eerie sensation of dislocation shook him.

The man frowned, began to step closer. Obi-wan's legs jumped back.

"Yes, I remember now. You're the one perched on the slipwalk this spring, eyeing my class. Skittery then, too." He glanced at the avian. "Difficult to remember such a flash; impossible to forget."

"How could you remember?!" Obi-wan blurted out, denying the possibility, trembling as the man's face began to blur, becoming sharper along the jaw, the eyes darkening to claret, the thick hair turning black beneath a harsh, helmet frame.

"What? Oh, child, of course I remember. Who could forget such a screw of presence? Henke, I think this is the spark you've remarked upon these past weeks."

"What are you going to do?" Obi-wan whispered, hoping not to be heard above the whine of the disruptor beams--he had heard the beams, yes; however thick the Otherworld he had stumbled into had been, their sound had been a lifeline that had kept him from falling into the endless nothingness...

"Zadexxet, the boy--"

"Here, what's all this?" The Jranikan reached out in mind and hand to calm Obi-wan. "Why the terror, younger, and what the reason?"

And he would have run for certain then, his body no longer willing to endure this test, but a great wing unfolded and arched gently about him. Long pinions sheltered him, enveloping him, muting the

noise, coaxing him away from the helmet and face of death, away from the piercing, fiery eyes.

The tension vanished. Obi-wan swayed amidst the sweet calm that surrounded him, but an empathy that transcended sympathy steadied him, reminding him of who he was, bringing his body back to him. The wish to explain rose; he hesitated, but there was no pressure to continue, just patience. "I'm sorry," he began unsurely. "The Sith--I was startled--Mem--my mother--died on Hala during--"

"I am Jranikan," he heard the dark Jedi say.

Embarrassment covered his fright. "I know, it's stupid, but..." Foolish, he was foolish. Of course this man had had nothing to do with Hala; of course, there was no one to flee here. Obi-wan purposefully drew on the calm, feeding on it, expanding it. He thought of his mother, of the quiet she could bring him, by reaching into him to soothe and guide... This was good, like the beginning of his dreams, like the odd, wondrous headiness he had felt so briefly on his tours from Brokaw. His mother had touched him this way, as the stranger did...

Obi-wan's tranquility trembled. He remembered too much; he remembered his mother had told him not to do that, had made him promise not to reach into others. What had she said? He couldn't say but he could feel the Wrongness and it welcomed the way for the greater Dark beyond... Confusion choked the Jedi's peace within Obi-wan. Mem had said he must not do...like how the ruby-eyed Sith had called him, touching him inside, commanding him to come and be killed like his mother--and his mother had made him promise not to hurt anyone...like how the cruel legion captain had reached into Mem, breaking her powers, making her cry...

Promise me, Obi, that you'll always be afraid of the Dark. Run my starfire!... Be nothing!

And he had become nothing and had found the Dark and had been afraid, terribly afraid--

The spell shattered. Rejection fueled dread, exploding in the Force-bred gentleness about Obi-wan, warding him from its healing ministrations.

He ran. He spun away under the avian's wing and fled. When he could no longer sense the Jedi, when he could feel nothing but his heaving chest, still he ran. In the warmth of his dormer, behind the safety of his room door, he threw himself on his bed, face down, and refused to think at all.

Oxxler Zadexxet laid a hand on Henke's extended wing and stayed the Brokovian from taking to the air. They had followed the boy out of the building, the child's distress foremost in their thoughts, but now the Jranikan thought it better to wait.

"But, Oxxler," Henke protested. "He needs assistance; he must be spinning from that mess of short-circuiting powers!"

"I know. But how to separate..." The other Jedi sighed. "I can't blame the boy. I've had worse reactions from older students who were nowhere near an Incursion raid. Perhaps I should paint my face purple and wear a shroud and blinders."

"And be a mockwren. There's more to that boy than bad memories, Oxxler. Force knows I'm no expert on raw talent, but if that taste was a true measure of potential and not just a reflection of over-exposure, we had best get someone on it who does know what's to be done."

"Poor younger. Can't be comfortable for him. I wonder. Do you think he's the one Eallana was complaining about--you remember, the 'over-educated under-age dilettante courtier' she mentioned? Dressed like it at any rate."

"Oxxler, there was more than fear, or a layman's knowledge caught short, working in that boy."

"Hmm. He was building on your projection like a novice."

"Exactly!"

"But I think we had better wait and see." The Jranikan rested his hands on his hips, ignoring his companion's protests. Oxxler Zadexxet was a man too familiar with sheer physical power to rush in unwelcome even on the gentler levels of Force.

Perhaps he would write for advice.

"Don't forget about New Year!" Mistress Faffston called out as the cab door opened. Obi-wan waved back one last time, shouting an assurance that he wouldn't, then climbed into the small transport and let the door close silently behind him. For the first time in weeks, he felt fully rested, free of pressures. He knew he had imposed on the Faffstons, but visiting with them had been a step back into the life of a business's son, a life where folk only worried about next fifth's dividend, or the price of crystopaz on Commenor.

And he liked Nesve Faffston's family. Haroh, the oldest son, was a fellow student at the Academy and solely in the research unit, which meant his gossip never

included talk of Jranikan flight instructors or Kressano lawyers. Blinet was a girl his own age, as inclined to teasing and private play as Galreath had been back on the *Serene Star*, (and, as a Ryllan, more free with such interests than his Bestinian shipmate was allowed to be). And Nally, for all that he was only ten reyears old, was fun to be with; Obi-wan had indulged the boy that day by playing merchant to Nally's collection of precious sea shells and agates.

Looking again at the sea-crown Nally had given him, Obi-wan judged its worth at double-delph, minimum, even in its raw state. Set in a proper corona as a gift to Mistress Faffston for her hospitality, its value would double. Instructing the autopilot to steer for the Company office at Plaza Desquenas, Obi-wan smiled to imagine watching Nally's pleasure in seeing his mother so adorned.

He composed a letter to Arde-wan as he rode, explaining the gift, describing his studies, tempering his discussion of his extra-curricular activities. Arde-wan had never denied him much, but some adolescent instinct warned Obi-wan to be discreet. He failed to mention the day his elementary navigation study group had programmed a customs-and-pirates game into the class computer; when caught, it had seemed only right that he pay for the spent energy, the scheme having been his idea after all. And the measures spent at the clubs with Skelt and corps were better left unspoken of, too; Per tended to be over-protective at times. Of course that meant he couldn't tell Per that perhaps he had spotted Ende-deuc Kenobi with some real space pirates (at least Oyega and Femeli had assured him that they were pirates, and he was moderately certain that the Vessan with them had been his uncle), but, after all, Per was probably better off not thinking about Ta Ende, too.

"Good day, Master Obi-wan," the office droid greeted as Obi-wan tossed his vested overtunic on a desk in the reception area. Primetime work had ended a measure or so ago and auxtime workers had not yet arrived; except for the droid, the office was deserted.

"And to you PR-04," Obi-wan answered absently, searching for a tape. Finding one, he settled at Endero-sep's desk and began to dictate rapidly.

"...and then Mistress Trena recited a hysterical epic on the ineptitude of the regulatory branch of the--listen to this--Department for the Clarification of Migratory Patterns in Spacers of the Third Generation when Affected by...by...hold on, Per." Obi-wan swung about in the chair and stared out the window while he concentrated on remembering the jibe at Center bureaucracy. The sky was amazingly blue that day, with clouds that stood out in stark white and silver relief against its solid back-

drop. Obi-wan's attention began to drift with the clouds; the tower was so high he could almost reach out through the glaucine and touch the white mists. He had done that, once, on Brokaw, atop the blowy crown of an ancient aerie.

Then he thought of the avian, Henke.

The Jedi, how could he tell Per about them without sounding hopelessly juvenile? He could only be grateful for the good fortune that had kept his friends from calling at his room when he was still shaken from a dream, or from crossing his path when he ran like... Just remembering the morning he had met Zadexet and Henke made Obi-wan flush. Stupid, silly, childish...he rocked back in the chair and decided not to tell Arde-wan. No one else at all need know how ridiculously he had acted.

He watched the sky change and relaxed, allowing the steady rock of the chair to lull him into daydreaming. He felt good about his decision to conquer this problem without Arde-wan's help, stronger somehow, as if he had lifted some invisible burden from his father's shoulders.

A seasoarer dipped by the office tower, taking Obi-wan's imagination with it on a deep slalom. Gliding with the bird, Obi-wan found himself disassociating again, but with the tingling pleasure that accompanied the beginning of his dreams, and the peace that had sparked in him so briefly with the Jedi. Determined to capture that good, as mind and body separated, so did mind and emotion. His thoughts, not his heart, willingly governed an experience that transcended any he had known. His perceptions stretched, expanded, ballooned until he was part of the islands, part of the seas, the entire planet, clouds, sky and all, then he felt he could encompass the sun and all of the stars until he was vastness itself, part of the nothingness that still lived and was called Life. And in the simplicity of Life's inexorable turning, he knew beauty and despair and the caress of a power that was blindingly good and indifferently wrong--

A nauseous pain drenched Obi-wan. He groaned and bent forward, his head cradled in his arms. Feelings he had denied battered him and the barrier they erected against what he had seen held fast. Obi-wan struggled to recapture the exquisite visions, but he reeled from the strength of that wall. Angrily, he reached into himself to excise the vigilance, but his sight failed and his perceptions were numbed. The Darkness had swallowed his will and his desire for the light quailed and slid away.

Exhausted, he fell back in the chair. The view was too empty to bear and he turned back to the console. Per; how could he tell Per any of this? Per would only say forget what so disturbs you, and

Obi-wan did not want to forget such glory. The Jedi? He thought of the Jedi, but rejected them, too. Somehow he knew they would demand he confront the demons he feared. A shudder coursed through him at the thought. The Light he could put aside; the Dark always remained.

He knew of no one he could turn to but himself, and that was little comfort.

LAST FIFTH

Mneosg, Urt
6025.43.09

Greetings to you, Oxxler,

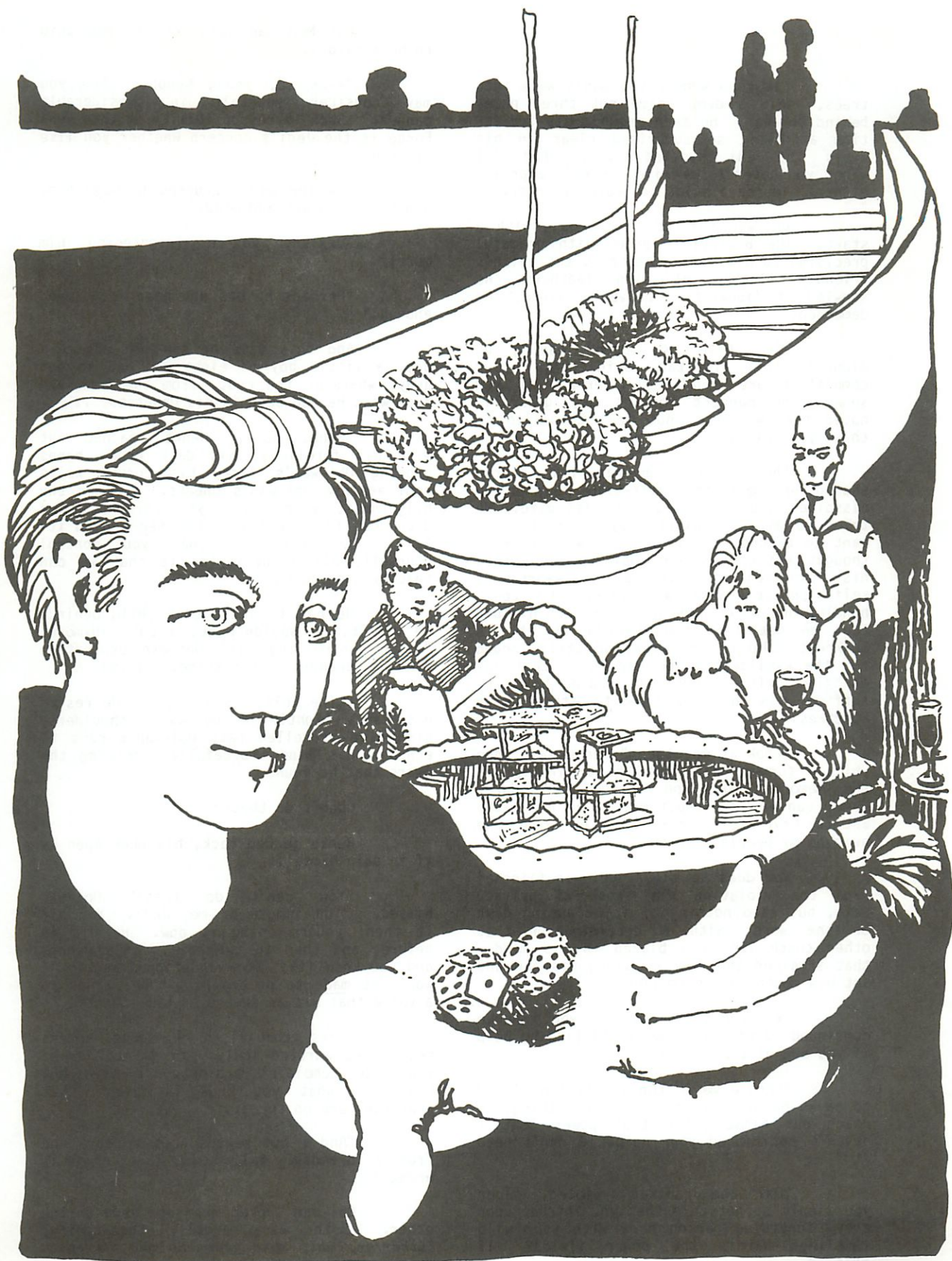
(Quickly now, for I am once again off to Aguens. I envy your good fortune to be on Rynan; I must contend with stubborn, single-minded Aguent businessers bent on economic havoc. Give me a good honest thief to contend with any day. Tell me, do you remember any talk of such duties when you were trained? I thought not.) To your question (and I apologize for the delay in answering--this problem I struggle with in the east sector could easily lead to violent confrontation and I am charged with keeping the peace, a task which is not conducive to a finely-tuned memory, even for friends): Of course, I've heard of the Kenobi of Ves. Damn fine crafters--artists, truly--and a fairly good reputation as a galactic corporate entity. When I mentioned your situation to one of the fellows on my task force, he practically flew at me for more information. Therefore, I suggest you write him, not me: Allyn Emarie, Alderaan Enclave, Eio, etc. Seems he's related to your boy. For myself, I can't say I see any irreparable danger in training laymen in the lesser ways of the Force. Perhaps if such had been done long ago, the Sith would not have seemed so powerful with their abilities. I know you subscribe to the view of Master Lolek, but he would make a mystique out of the Jedi. There are already quite enough folk who share that view, and in my opinion, not for the good of any (must the Order go through this sort of thing every millennium? You'd think people would learn). I suppose there will be a great deal of discussion on all sides of the question now that the wars are over and Lolek can once again command attention.

I must go. When you return to Urt, we must take time to renew all our old arguments. Meantime, write to Emarie (and hope to catch him onplanet). I warn you to temper what he says strictly; Allyn is a good man, but given to great enthusiasms.

I remain your fellow in the Force,

Your friend,

Hevilet D'Orgn, Jedi



Knapp

"It is a wonder you don't walk into trees," said a deep voice not three paces behind Obi-wan. He spun around, his irritation at being so surprised clear in his eyes. The Jedi chuckled dryly. "And I'll wager you haven't perceived Henke's approach either. You have a lot to learn, younger."

Obi-wan twisted back around with a start. The Brokovian landed with graceful precision to his left. Ignoring the avian's friendly flutter of wing feathers, he scowled at Zadexxet. "Leave me alone," he demanded.

"You have not been leaving us alone," the Jranikan said, "so your complaints are equalized. Perhaps if you showed the manners Vessans are generally noted for, we might not feel compelled to chase you down so."

The courage Obi-wan had stored should he meet the half-Sith Jedi again dissolved under the steady scarlet gaze. He tried to avoid Zadexxet's eyes; he did not want to discuss his troubles. With careful thought and application, Obi-wan had worked his experiences into a framework of self-hypnotic cause and effect he could handle, one which made no demands on him but that he not look too closely at it. A bankrupt solution, he knew; he still longed for the exhilaration he had found that day at the office, but it would have to suffice. He had no time to strive with spectres.

"Look at me, then," Henke said when Obi-wan turned away from the Jranikan, "if the memories are too fierce to endure. Come, can you not trust me? I am not Sith, and I have felt your sympathy with the heights my people cherish."

How does he know? Obi-wan flinched from the violation his sense of privacy felt, but said nothing of it, clamping down on the words with a determination--that other touch long ago blazed in his mind--that strained the muscles along his jaw and set his mouth in a grim line.

"We are concerned for you," Henke continued carefully. "We would like to help if you are distressed."

"Excuse me--" the temptation flared to do as he had done then, to be nothing, to reach out himself for that power "but I haven't petitioned your help. I don't need it."

"Oh?" the Jranikan grumbled. "Then you simply do not care that you intrude upon every sensitive person here with your wild ramblings within the power fields? If that--"

But Mem had said not to, had said to be afraid...

"--is so, young Kenobi, then you may consider yourself in considerable danger. Such irresponsibility within the Force is the Jedi's concern whether you like it or not!"

Now the panic coursed through him, numbing his heart and mind.

"Oxxler, you're frightening him more!"

"Perhaps he has not been frightened enough."

And this time he saw the Other, a boy, a little boy of eight who had to get away, whatever the cost, from the Sith and from what he had seen in his Otherness...

"Shhh, hush," Henke reached out with his forelimbs, his dark brown hands cupping Obi-wan's face, his curved nails cool against Obi-wan's cheeks. "Damp the brightness, young one; you burn like an unchecked flame and I cannot see behind it. All Oxxler asks is that you control yourself; all I am saying is that we can teach you to do so."

He had to leave that child behind; he wasn't, he wouldn't be, a baby anymore. "I am controlling it!" Obi-wan protested, finding strength in his shame. "I am!"

"Like this," Henke said. He rested his hands lightly on Obi-wan's shoulders; his voice travelled past Obi-wan's ears to echo in his mind, forcefully tempering the fears that he found.

"Don't do that!"

Henke jerked back, his beak open as if in pain himself.

"You can't do that!" Obi-wan hissed. "You impose on me, Jedi. You did it then; you're doing it now. He did it before, and then in the hall. It's wrong, and you know it!" Obi-wan stepped back. "I won't be made to do anything," he warned in a voice that was as severe as his stance.

"This comparison I sense angers me," Henke warbled lowly. "I am not he who you have complaint against. I have but built on what you know is true: that Jranikans are no threat."

"And I but reached out to save you from a dreadful fall. Is that a great wrong?"

Obi-wan looked from one Jedi to the other. Both were equally threatening. *Either/or, Obi, make your choice. Let them drag you through the Dark, or walk away once and for all. What do you want, Obi? What*

price are you willing to pay?

Obi-wan took a breath and drove the intoxicating hope from his self; he pushed it away and built a barrier to that calm. He denied the promise and the price. Silently, he stepped away and left the Jedi.

"Damn." Zadexxet dropped to the ground next to Henke, who had buried his beak in his chest down, deep in thought. "Damn it to World's End. That child is slippery. How can we get him near a Master when he won't even talk with us?"

"Maybe," said Henke's muffled voice, "he will simply burn so brightly he will incinerate the source of his flame."

"And how many others with him?" Oxxler demanded, staring after the distant, disappearing figure. "Damn."

Eio, Alderaan
6025. 46.10

...

That is the story, fellow Zadexxet. Judge it as you may. I am convinced of my nephew's place among the Jedi and am grateful that his path has crossed yours. I knew of his travels to Brokaw and Skylan, but the Captains there are well-acquainted with the Ves Enclave and my brother-in-law's wishes. Perhaps they are right to leave Obi-wan's fate to the turning of the wheel. Your descriptions of his distress cannot but convince me otherwise.

Can you help him? Can you reach him? I would come to Rynan myself, but am caught up in this business of over-ambitious corporations. You say you are reluctant to encourage a boy with so many other commitments, so many other paths to prominence. I look about me at these folk with temporal power and shudder to think of Obi-wan's talents muzzled by their grasping concerns. His is a talent seldom brought to flower, one his mother only showed promise of. She, too, feared for his powers, but I tell you that before Hala there was no shadow on the boy.

Perhaps his father has turned him as he promised he would do. I will leave you to judge, but in any case, please try to ease his pain. I cannot believe ill of Obi-wan and would at least know that he is at peace.

With gratitude,

Allyn Emarie, Jedi

Galactic New Year on Rynan was a glorious holiday with avenues draped in flowers, a week of feasting and dancing everywhere one turned, and the everyday gaiety of a tropical paradise multiplied beyond belief. For a fifth before the holiday, the Academy scientists and planetary meteorologists worked without pause to guarantee the weather; before New Year and when the ten days had passed, the storms could thunder and squall, but for the week of celebrations, all would be perfect.

Obi-wan had talked Blinet away from home and family eyes at last, and with a holiday draft from Per in his account, he guided her through the celebrating crowds to meet his friends at the Callameloda. New Year was four days old and the planet itself seemed giddy as they laughed their way through the evening. Skelt had held true to his promise to keep the teasing down, and even Oyega had somewhat suspended his gruff references to Obi-wan's age. The buffet in the sealevel lounge was never empty, the music soared through the rooms, the talk was witty and Blinet was wonderfully impressed.

"Just wait till you see the way this Vessan handles the board. All right, sit up, boy; you're too young for that sort of thing anyhow. I tell you, he is a wizard at truddelty."

Obi-wan sat up from the cushions and would have answered Oyega sharply, but Blinet only laughed at the Y'kshirley and called him a jealous busybody. "You tell him," Obi-wan heard Wryt declare behind them. The Ptlmy settled on a pillow nearby and leaned over to whisper in his ear, "Do you have enough to stake us for a round, Obi? We've got a couple of gullibles here."

Leaning forward, Obi-wan noted the two wookies Skelt was urging to sit down and frowned. "Don't expect me to fix the game for you Wryt," he whispered back. "They're bigger than all of us combined."

"Amateurs, mere amateurs, Obi. Besides, who's asking you to cheat? Just play with your usual brilliance. Thank you, Blinet." Wryt gathered a number of tasties from the plate Blinet passed among the newcomers, then shook his head at her and Obi-wan. "I don't know how you humans keep your population down, sparking around as early as you do. Of course, one could say that humans never have kept their populations down, couldn't one? Waiter?"

"Gamesdroid!" Obi-wan called out, ignoring Blinet's silent giggles beside him. He was not amused with the Ptlmy's wit and made a note not to spare Wryt in the game. Yes, Per had scolded him for taking advantage of others, but Obi-wan did not notice his friends telling their new friends the true measure of Obi-wan's skill at the

game. Well. He glanced at the Wookiees and edged closer to the table. Per's own personal agent on Kazeel had first taught Obi-wan this game, native to that jungle planet of long lives and longer memories. Tonight Obi-wan would prove himself a worthy student.

A suspicion of irregularity crept upon him sometime during the second game. As usual Wryt had exclaimed loudly over his losses; as always, the new players would marvel at such a youngster's skill and lose heavily.

But the wookiees' harshly spoken compliments and their spare, challenging game could not distract Obi-wan from his uneasy notion that something was wrong with his playing.

A particularly difficult set was rolled for him by Ata. Obi-wan nodded confidently. He knew every combination for this solution, including a couple no one had taught him; this was his play to conquer, however the dodecahedrons rolled. He set the dice rattling about the board for his parameters. They were excellent, as always, despite the sudden doubt that made him draw back his hand at the last moment. He pushed the distraction aside in irritation. The combinations were simply with him (*of course, they are*, some inner voice retorted) and any combo would have done anyway because he knew a dozen moves in this situation (*of course you know, you always know what the puzzle will be*). Frowning, Obi-wan chose his pieces and scattered the spectrum chips to predict the next arrangement, the final step in securing his score. They settled into place and within him a voice predicted each fall: red to A3, blue to squared 6, green to B7, yellow, orange and purple in perfect angles at center.

A groan rose from the players; Obi-wan barely heard. The game continued, his turn coming around once, then twice; each time it was the same. The pentagonal dice settled where he had planned them to lay--no, where he wanted them to lay, just that and nothing more--no, where he willed them to lay. He tried to stop the manipulation, but the--power?--was too automatic. He longed to crawl away, to hide. He had never meant to be a trickster.

"Obi? Obi-wan?" It was Blinet, tugging worriedly at his sleeve. "Is anything wrong?"

Obi-wan felt his friends' eyes on him; he knew they were thinking he had sipped too heartily at the carnival wine. "I'm fine," he said clearly, mustering what control he had over himself to sound cheerfully alert. "Hasn't anyone else here noticed that the pickled eel is enough to turn a Halite's indigestion inside out?"

"Oh ho, that's a quick recovery!" Skelt exclaimed. "Obi, you're learning."

Hiding the bleakness he felt behind a small grin, Obi-wan dearly wished it were so.

Serene Star, orb. Aleska
6026.01.01

My dear Son,

Happy New Year! May the coming days find you happy and growing in wisdom; may you look back a year from today and be satisfied with your life.

Can it be possible that three fifths have passed since you began your studies on Rynan? Far Sector is such a confusing, if fascinating, jumble of planets and people that I find my days slipping away before I have counted them. Were it not for Yverane, I would be totally turned about.

(I will assume your schedule is similar since it has been four weeks since I heard from you last. Really, Obi...)

Your fifth-end reports arrived and I am most satisfied with your progress, although I note that some of your professors comment on variations in your work quality and suggest alterations in habits to alleviate the problems. Obi, I know I often demand a great deal of you; I know some of your tutors have expected more than was fair. But I am concerned. You've made no further mention of involuntary disruptions of your sleep, which only leads me to believe you are indulging a bit in your off-hours. Obi, remember to be prudent. Rynan has many temptations and your friends among the post-graduates are certain to take part in many that are a bit rich for someone your age. Remember your Ta Ende and where his too-early experimentation led him: adventuring in downport cantinas with profiteers and weaponslinging outlaws. The habits you acquire now will stay with you through life. Consider carefully the years ahead of you and prepare wisely. Visit the Faffston children more often if you need diversion.

Enough of such New Year lectures; I have the firmest confidence in your good common sense. Have you heard that the Prince Zakrefske is dead? Yes, last Midyear. I have sent my condolences and would like you to do the same. Ignaze was an autocratic barbarian, but he always expressed interest in you, if for no other reason than he knew you would be rival to his sons. In like spirit, I am arranging to visit Vehenev shortly after meeting you come the 20th to pay our respects. As the Karatzev mourn their great Princes for two planet years minimum, we will have to be clever in conducting our business. This will be a good chance for you to watch how

one can see to Company interests without showing callousness toward local customs. I dare say the new Prince will be eager to treat with me: his father carried current deals in his head, and propelled his business by the force of his personality; Rgegor Ignazivitch will be scrambling to prove his authority (the younger brother, not the heir, inherited his father's business acumen). I'll explain more later. Do you remember the Prince's daughter, Nanyebln? I believe she is your age; if the business grows too boring, perhaps you can pass the time with her.

As for this business venture. I hesitate to bore you with details, but...

As you see, we continue to profit by the trip. I have sent your sea-crown on to Gwhy-wan for setting; it should arrive within the fifth. Send my love to Nesve and Trena, both, when you visit them next.

Till the 20th,

Love and best wishes,

Per

6026, FIRST FIFTH

Obi-wan did his best to maintain a positive attitude despite the growing conviction that he had lost control of himself. When he could forget that there was something definitely wrong about his life, studies went well, as did his times with Skelt and the others. The sharp competition at the Academy more finely honed the confidence and wit he had learned at his father's side; the finesse Arde-wan had taught him deftly created a bridge between himself and the teachers and students who questioned his age. If not for Eallanna Aa, he might have maintained the facade indefinitely.

But his most ardent attempts to withdraw within himself when about the Jedi were useless. Whenever her gaze became too intent or her voice seemed to carry messages only Obi-wan could hear; when she snapped at him for no visible cause, his brave presentation collapsed and his moods became frantic. Attention to detail disappeared under mounting doubts; patience vanished when confronted by a mocking doom-sense that would not diminish whatever he tried. He had banished his dreams but his victory was an echo of the New Year's truddelty game, and he grew frantic from the confusion of right and wrong. No amount of rationalization could soothe him for long; when he could account for his use of such powers, the temptation to reach out for more took hold of him and he would find himself tumbling into that Otherness again. Round and round he went in his thoughts until not thinking at all was his only release.

He learned to give into his feelings that recoiled from all danger; his feelings never found the Dark--interesting.

(He tried to explain this to Skelt--that he sometimes worried over his fascination with control, that he might be less than the honest person he had thought he was--but the Dotarian, for all his friendly listening, consoled him with assurances that the morose moods would pass, that such doubts were common when you were fourteen going on fifteen.)

He thought that perhaps he was going mad. Perhaps he would fall into his dreamy abyss and never be rescued. He grieved over the disappointment he would cause his father. He hoped Eallanna Aa felt guilty for days.

Isle of Ka, Rynan
6026.05.06

I greet you, Allyn Emarie,

Your nephew, fellow Emarie, is not one to grant peace to those who concern themselves with him.

Since his last reaction to our friendly overtures before the New Year, Henke and I have watched him distantly; you have said your sister's husband seeks to make a galaxywide business out of him and I can assure you he is succeeding. Young Kenobi's professors cannot praise him enough; even the Deseratine, Pakta, who is loath to admit good in any being, particularly rich transients, sings of his charms. He is brilliant in his studies, appealing beyond belief when he wishes to be, and adamant in his conviction that he knows what is best for himself at all times. Along with being clever, he is fond of entertainment and cavorts with a cadre of assistants who, for all their solid scholarship, are far too fond of carousing.

If this were all...fellow Emarie, I agree something must be done with the boy. Henke agrees; Eallanna Aa, who is the only Jedi here who confronts his precocity regularly, is most insistent on the subject. There have been no more of the sudden and wild breaches into power that all of us perceived when young Obi-wan first came, but his untrained efforts at control and elimination are both constantly at the edge of our small power reservoir here; and unrestrained in their waxing and waning. It is difficult not to react in irritation to the intrusion, but the boy has said 'no' each time to offers of aid.

Fellow Emarie, how are we to reach this nephew of yours? Can you give the clue we need to create the understanding necessary? I know why he rejects me, but tell us what is so frightening about Henke

Y'erkk'y'ko, surely one of the Order's gentlest folk? If he will not be reached through choice, I fear it will come to unkind ways. If he will not understand his powers, his impositions on others will leave us with no other alternative; I will not be derelict in my duty to protect the ways of commonfolk from unreined power.

I do not mean to imply that I see evil in the boy's ways. But he must learn proper control. Master Lolek has said: The powers within the universe must keep to parallel tracks; in such symmetry is the order of the universe maintained. Young Kenobi's track stretches along the Way of Wealthy Influence. He must learn distance and respect for other Ways.

I remain yours in the Force,

Oxxler Zadexxet, Jedi

Obi-wan had an unexpected visitor late in the fifth on a day that had not yet decided whether to be gloomy or gay. At first, he glared at the message on his desk-comp, then a wave of guilt washed over him. He had neglected his obligations to his father's friends terribly since New Year; Per would never understand what had happened and would be hard pressed to forgive. Obi-wan keyed his acknowledgment, then forced himself to be attentive to his dress. A tentative ray of light-heartedness lightened within him at the prospect of irrelevant conversation, only to be blasted into splinters of foolishness by a stern reaction that questioned whether such a realization was born in mere hope or something more sinister, such as a knowing prediction.

Damn! He cursed, slapping his palm against the hall controls. *Leave me alone,* he railed against his inner voice. *There's nothing wrong with me, there isn't, there isn't.*

"Good day, Master Kenobi. Forgive my presumption, but I would speak with you before I leave."

Obi-wan stood stunned just inside the guest room doorway and barely heard the wall slide shut behind him. Instead of a travelling business, or a Ryllan in sunhat and hipskirt, he had just come face to face with Henke Y'erkk'y'ko in full Jedi dress. An intricate bracing across the avian's breast was secured at the neck with the pastel emblem of Brokaw enameled on a sturdy buckle; long gloves covered the unfeathered forearms; a lightsaber of intricate hilt design nestled loosely, accessibly, below the powerful left wing. There could be no denying the aura of readiness that radiated from the Jedi; no refusal of power awaiting

conscious call.

"You're leaving?" Obi-wan managed to say.

Freshly preened feathers ruffled in a flurry of fawn and gold. "Yes, no more holiday for me. My Captain sends me to some affair outbeyond the Rim. I do as I must, as so do we all, eh?"

"I don't understand. Why come here?"

"Awkward, is it not? After Oxxler and I have been so presumptuous with you, no? But my people are not facile at slipping by indiscretions. Before I leave, I would clear the way between us of unhappy memories."

"It, ah, really isn't necessary, Ser Jedi, I--" Obi-wan stopped. Before him, standing in the sunlight that pooled in the middle of the room, the Jedi rose to stand high on his feather-draped legs; his wings raised, half-spread, in formal greeting salute; his head dipping to the right of his breast in respect.

"Master Kenobi," the Brokavian sang, "I am Henke Y'erkk'y'ko, born to the aerie Sekagit, of the Brokaw Enclave. My protection is yours to claim."

There was nothing to do but return the courtesy, and Obi-wan did so with the flourish necessary to match Henke's honor. "I greet you, Y'erkk'y'ko of Sekagit," he said, his voice recovering the confidence that had slipped from it so often in weeks past. His self-esteem waxed in the Jedi's glow, in the security of the forms they now shared. "I am Obi-wan, son of Arde-wan of the allya Kenobi on Ves. Your service is welcome, Jedi; may your blade stay peacefully sheathed."

Next, he should invite Henke to settle; amazingly, the gesture flowed as freely from him as the words had. He smiled broadly, doubt cleared, if only momentarily by proper behavior. "What can I do to serve you, Ser Jedi?"

Henke nodded solemnly. "Let us part on friendly terms, Master Obi-wan. Let us talk."

"No, Ser Henke, I was remiss." Obi-wan insisted the fault was his; it would do neither of them any good to maintain the fantasy that he had known better than his elders. If he had just thought about it a little, he would have realized the understandably hectic image he had presented to the Jedi. Ser Zadexxet had been right; Obi-wan should have attended to his manners more. Fortunately, he assured Henke, the problem was over.

Obi-wan knew Henke's rustle of feathers was a sigh; he waited for the avian to undo the delicate rapport between them. He was enjoying the talk with Henke; for the first time since meeting one of the Ryllan Jedi, he did not feel like a mewling child.

"And so, next year you study elsewhere?" Henke asked.

"And the year after that and the year after that." Obi-wan relaxed again. "Until Per thinks I've accumulated enough trivia to fit in wherever the Company goes. He wants me to start sitting in on some actual meetings soon, though, so I suppose the weeks between studies will get longer."

"The offspring of great families carry heavy burdens at young ages."

"Ah..." Obi-wan shrugged, uncertain how to respond. "I would suppose only children in any kind of ambitious family do. It's really not that--"

"If you had your own wish, if your time was your own to govern, where would you study, and what?"

"But I can do anything I want."

"If you didn't have to fit in wherever the Company goes."

"Oh, what's the use of daydreams... Brokaw. If I could repeat any session I could, I'd go to Brokaw. But I really don't see why I should think..." He remembered the Whills, the silly, magnificent Whills and their music. "I'd--well, I'd like to learn all the Songtales and Histories. And maybe go home and learn about growing things. That would be nice. I had some flowers I used to grow for Mem once..." Obi-wan looked beyond the Jedi, into the sunlight. "I'd like to know how all this works, why all this works. Not the contracts or the politics or who marries whom, but...but...what keeps the universe turning and what keeps all the different ways of living...well, working." He looked sheepishly back at Henke. "I can't think of the word I want. Do you--"

"Yes, I know what you mean. And what would you do with everything you learned if you could so study?"

"Oh, stars...I don't know." He shrugged. "I don't know. I never thought about it before. I guess..." Obi-wan leaned forward, a happy sense of intrigue filling him. He clasped his hands and grinned at the Jedi. "If I knew how everything worked, really knew, then I'd take everything I knew and make it work right, instead of all this bouncing around everything does between what could be and what is. Everyone would know what to do to get what they need, and everyone would be happy."

"My, ambitious little god, aren't you?!"

Obi-wan sat up indignantly. "You're laughing at me."

"You're laughing at yourself!"

Half-smothering a giggle, Obi-wan leaned back on his arms on the float-cushion. "But it would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"I think it would be like being a mindless machine, actually. In life, good and bad are inseparable. Neither diminishes the other. What do you think?"

Studying the tip of his slipboot as he crossed his legs, Obi-wan did not think much of the question at all. "When do you leave? Do you get to visit your home first?"

"Obi-wan, have you ever considered studying at the Alderaan Enclave at Eio? Where your uncle serves?"

Yes, he was going to have to see about getting the leather on his boot treated. "Why should I want to do that? The Jedi have nothing to do with business."

"Obi-wan, what is a Jedi?"

"Someone who gets killed."

"Oh, Obi-wan, I expected more imagination from you."

"Jedi maintain the galactic unity."

"Continue."

"By facilitating orderly congress between planets and systems through the maintenance of peaceful relations; through education and example, the Jedi remind all peoples of their fellowship within the circle of Life through the omnipresence of the Force; and with the cooperation of a representative government the Ways of Power, political, capital and forceful, merge and become one."

"Well enough said for merely an educated young man. What is the Force?"

"What does it matter?"

Henke waited.

"That which binds the universe together. The energy of life. What makes everything work." Obi-wan caught what he had said and felt his defenses harden against the plaintive call of curiosity the Brokavian had awakened within him.

"How everything works," Henke repeated. "Obi-wan--"

"No! I was just being silly, and

you agreed. Everything can be too frightening."

"No, only a little frightening, which is good. Obi-wan, the Jedi work with the Force on levels commonfolk don't bother with. We can help you master your talents, your dreams, the troubles that plague you."

"I don't need any help." Obi-wan sat up. "I don't."

"And when you can control your gifts, you can study anything at all. One day, maybe if you are gifted in other ways, too, you could become that great teacher you spoke of."

"And maybe get killed before then!" The afternoon was spoiled; at the edge of the Jedi's sunny aura, Obi-wan could sense the Darkness waiting.

"Obi-wan, surely you know better. You have been on Skylan and elsewhere. You know not all Jedi are knights; not all must use their blades--"

"And maybe worse," Obi-wan insisted. He gestured broadly at the ghosts. "Don't you see? There are even worse things than dying!"

"Obi-wan, what do you see?"

"You don't understand." Obi-wan tried to ignore the Jedi and the shadowy counterpart, grasping at a mannered tone and posture to keep himself secured to reality. "My father needs me. I'm his only child. I have the Company to run for him one day."

"Child, damper and let me help!" the Jedi snapped, his great hawk head nodding in frustration. He grasped Obi-wan's outspread hands with his own. "Obi-wan, what do you see?"

"You can't see it?!"

"No, child, I cannot." Henke's voice lowered to a soothing warble. "What blinds me is a terrible hurt and anxiety. Can I--"

He can't see it. It doesn't exist anywhere but inside me; it isn't real; it can't get me if it already is me. What he had believed for years was untrue and for one short burst of thought, Obi-wan doubted his fears.

A blaze of serenity burst through that break in the anguish, its glow matching the golden translucence of the wing that fanned across Obi-wan's gaze. Within the momentary shelter, he knew the peace of his meditation in the tower again; with the strength of the Jedi pouring into him, he could remember the joyous excitement of his dream's beginning; with the hesitation of a lonely child, he could envision the face,

the voice, the touch of his mother. He trembled. Henke kept his gaze and attention captive. For a heartbeat longer, he was whole again, able to face and accept what he knew was true: that to conquer the Dark, he must accept it.

"The Force is a mighty seducer, Obi-wan," Henke whispered. "Good and evil blur in the mind when such power can be tapped."

Not yet. A small boy's voice deep inside Obi-wan answered. Please not yet. Before his bravery vanished completely, the Jedi carefully pulled away, taking that horrible decision with him. Obi-wan waited for something--relief, or calm, or even the ignorance he had lived in so long, anything--to fill the void. Nothing came, and nothing would until he made his choice.

Not yet, no, he could not rise to meet the expectation in Henke's eyes. Casting his own gaze down, Obi-wan found the will to slip off the cushion and stand.

"Not yet," he repeated, hating the phrase even as he said it, longing for the beginning he still could not face, hoping the Jedi believed as much as he did that 'not yet' was but a promise.

In transit to Redants
6026.08.05

Friend Oxxler,

I write this in haste; the planet-shuttle leaves soon. Your last tape just reached me and I fear this mission will prevent me from transmitting again before term-end.

I have thought at great length on your words and still believe you misjudge the boy. He spoke not of building empires, but of reaching all folk with a vision of unity. No, his words were not those, but I remember my own adolescent dreams, Oxxler. And this boy has greater talent than I; perhaps he will come closer to sharing those ideals with all.

You must stop thinking of him as a child, despite his years! Yes, yes, it is the child in him who perceived the awfulness of great power and built a demon of it; it is that child that hampers him now. But you must reach out to the man in him, the adult that is coming. I did make progress in my last visit, Oxxler; it was not a delusion growing out of my "enrapture with genius".

He will come to you. I know it. I beg you: do not simply bandage his hurts, rather than heal them, from reluctance to encourage him in forceful matters. If he is destined to run afoul of your Master Lolek's precepts, then let Master Lolek concern

himself with Obi-wan Kenobi. You and I are not lone judges.

If you must rationalize your part in this--and yes, I know it is possible--he may never come to Enclave but that does not mean he has to misuse his talents along his way--say it is out of sympathy for your friend, Henke. I believe in the future of this boy; whatever power, temporal or forceful, he may one day command, I cannot see it wielded for evil

I must go; there is the departure signal. Until we meet again...

Your friend always,

Henke

Serene Star, orb. Nawovagnde
6026.12.05

Son Obi-wan,

Your acknowledgment of receipt of the mounted sea-crown arrived yesterday. I had hoped for a letter with it. It is now sixteen weeks since you have written. Under normal circumstances, I might think that the transmissions had been lost, but your fifth reports arrive always. If something is wrong, Obi-wan, is your father to remain ignorant of it? I am very angry about this and would rather be simply concerned; I prefer to fight my competitors, not my own son.

I dislike further discussion in this vein, but Endero-sep transmits draws against your budget that are exceedingly heavy. I note that your instructors still make mention of your distraction and I am disappointed in your intemperance.

Further, and I am quite cross on this point, you have ignored invitations from both the Greetchels and the Yametos. (When, pray tell, do you plan to deliver your gift to Trena Faffston?) I can appreciate the boredom of some of these visits, Obi-wan, but these are folk we should respect. And that, son, means accepting at least one invitation in three to visit. You have written to Prince Zakrefske, I trust?

Enough. The trip continues as before. I suspect we shall have to arrange a rendezvous point come the 20th since it appears we shall be carrying perishable cargo (don't ask; I am very tired and apparently easy to talk into foolish deals when so afflicted). Persevere in your studies.

Your father,

Arde-wan

Addendum: Obi, your last letter was nearly two fifth ago! And it was so disjointed and rambling. Have you run into that Jranikan again? You must tell me. I would be a fool not to worry; you are too precious to me! Fathers scold and fathers fuss, but in the end it is only because they care. Write soon!

Love,

Per

Addendum II: And visit the Yametos soon!

"My father would disown me if he knew I was here."

Oxxler Zadexxet laid down his stylus and refrained from swearing. So it hadn't been the soup at lunch that had given him such an uneasy feeling about the afternoon! He should have known the boy would not appear until the final testing time; somewhere in the mysteries of the Force it was written that the most difficult decisions could only come when one was least inclined to worry them. His romantic father would have loved the situation.

"So, then why are you here?" Discipline kept his voice sanguine; that, and his promise to Henke not to reject the boy.

"Maybe not disown me. But he wouldn't be at all happy." The slim figure in the doorway left the hall shadows and wandered about the room, picking up equipment absently. The closer he came to Zadexxet, the calmer he appeared, and the Jranikan could not resist empathizing with the relief the boy felt in simply arriving there; each crosspath met on his way over must have been a temptation to turn back. Kenobi ran a finger down a wrecked lateral fin that lay on a workshelf. "My uncle is a Jedi on Alderaan, though. Any my father's aunt and uncle were Jedi."

"Watch yourself; there's jagged metal on that. I've spoken with your uncle Emarie. He tells me your mother--"

"When I told Per about you, he said to mind my own business. I've always handled my problems alone."

"--was a very powerful person herself."

"Not that he meant to insult you. Per respects the Jedi."

"I'm certain he does."

"It's just that it's a dangerous life and he's afraid for me. Mem wasn't even a Jedi, and she died."

Oxxler winced at the reminder and the boy noted the fresh pain. Kenobi fell silent. Watching Obi-wan pace the length of the room, Zadexxet reminded himself to mind Henke and put aside the childish veneer the boy acquired whenever they were together. He studied the lanky body and conceded that it had grown a bit since year's beginning, shedding the last proportions of childhood; the awkwardness, too, was more pronounced; and the face for all its youthful softness was acquiring depth. No, Obi-wan was not a younger anymore, but only barely a youth. And, if Henke had been correct, that changing body was already six years old in experiences more often reserved for those older and far wiser.

"I have the highest regard for parental preferences, young Kenobi," the Jranikan said at last. "If I had known of his displeasure from the first--"

"But we would have sensed each other anyway," Obi-wan interrupted, "and all that has happened would have only happened later!"

"Yes, I can't imagine your control being any better whatever the passage of time."

"But I don't want to just control it." Obi-wan came about and swiftly faced Zadexxet, hesitating in his rushed approach only when he neared arms'-reach. The rest of the room dimmed before his intensity. "I wasn't controlling it very well anyway. Ser Henke said you could help. And that isn't wrong; Per took me to the Jedi before."

The tension in the boy touched Oxxler's heart, but the raw power Obi-wan projected made him tremble himself. "Then what do you plan to do with 'it'? Why have you come to me?"

Simple force of will had maintained the boy's composure and now it began to weaken. "I used to think it was real," he said, a quaver beginning in the voice that Oxxler recognized from before, the voice of a child so incongruous with the adolescent that stood before him. Obi-wan reached out jerkily to touch Zadexxet's sleeve. "Real, like you, and the Sith who--but Henke came and he couldn't see it. It's in me, it's caged in my mind but I can't unlock it. Henke said the Jedi could--I can't tell the difference between what I should and shouldn't..." The boy's hand gripped Zadexxet's arm in an act as brave as any he had known. "I'm afraid of myself, Ser Zadexxet, and I don't want to be. I won't be!"

Zadexxet bowed his head and covered the long thin fingers with his own. "Nor do any of us," he said as much to himself as to Obi-wan, "but sometimes all we can do is learn to live with our fearsomeness." He looked up into the alien sapphire eyes and

knew he could not deny this boy some comfort, if only of the forgetful kind. "If you will allow me to touch your mind," he said heavily, "I will show you how I have reckoned with the dark side of Oxxler Zadexxet."

The Jedi lifted his face from his hands and stared at the sleeping figure in the darkened dormer room. The boy lay so surely, so completely, within his covers that Zadexxet himself had to willfully remember the terrible travels they had taken together to banish the distortions of the boy's being and make the beleaguered spirit whole again.

In truth, he did not want to remember and could not fault the boy for having run away all these years. It was no small matter to confront the pure power of the Force in all its potential for good and evil when only eight years old. Lesser wills in grown beings quailed before the evidence of both realities in life; facing the numbing enormity of Life again had drained Zadexxet's sense of self, and would always do so however many times he roamed that thundering country.

He wondered how the boy had managed to journey there in the first place and could only acknowledge inborn talent in answer. The thought amazed him and sobered him. The mother had seen the danger birthed in the boy and had warned of it at the end. As Zadexxet reviewed the events Obi-wan had remembered, he saw more clearly how the child had taken his mother's scolding and had forged it to his visions within the Force, linking it with the malfeasance he had seen in the Darkside, molding it into a malevolence to be avoided at all costs. When brought to Alderaan for Healing, Obi-wan had already buried what had been too vast for his child's mind to comprehend. The Jedi there had seen to the other horrors, perhaps unaware of the blinding already, perhaps believing the holds necessary on untrained powers had been welded shut with the boy's mechanisms.

What to do next. He had planned to simply redirect the boy's memories; that had been the hope of a straw house against a winter storm. If Henke were there, he'd play dark advocate against the Brokovian's belief in young Kenobi's future. But Henke could not counsel him now. The Jranikan thought of his teacher, Lolek, and knew the Avarav Master would not approve of the boy's training in the Order. The vigilance of the Jedi among themselves was all that protected commonfolk from the travesty of power run amok.

Even the lay training so many took under Jedi guidance might prove too tempting, Zadexxet thought, continuing with his teacher's reasoning. The Republic was

growing fat. Even in the fabulous days of the Merchant's League, the threat of Xet's domination kept the galactic social order on edge, alert for danger without and within. With the Sith Legions disbanded, with a Dark Lord more concerned with merely keeping his people alive than conquering, people could grow careless. Friend Hevilet's greedy businessers and Henke's disturbances on the Rim were pale threats. In such a society as might grow from opulent peace, who would look to a charmingly wealthy man for misuse of the Force? Who would believe evil within such packaging and with the endorsement of training?

No, whatever the innocence he saw in the boy now, whatever the hope good Henke had been so certain of, Oxxler Zadexxet would not rest easy if he encouraged this youth. He stood, his conscience beginning to find its rest at last, and walked to the door.

Henke had been right about helping the boy, but in the resolution of this further matter, Zadexxet was grateful his friend could not be there. He further hoped his Brokovian friend did not mark him too severely for the use he was going to make with the boy concerning Henke's death.

Obi-wan watched his window lighten into day. He did not remember much of what had happened in the Jedi's office; he didn't even remember coming back to his room. But it was of no concern. The whole experience seemed as far away as Hala now and he was glad of it. A bit of irritation at having lost five years of his life nibbled at him, but he could think about that later. All he wanted to do this morning was bask in the sensation of knowing who he was, really knowing, with his mind and his heart and his gut. The missing piece had been set into place and he revelled in the snug fit. He could even laugh at the gangly, bony boy he saw reflected in the mirror above his desk; how normal that kind of misfitting felt!

He wondered if his father would recognize the change, then flushed as he recalled Arde-wan's last transmission. Quickly reaching for a blank tape, Obi-wan composed a conciliatory letter. "Dear Per, Actually, I haven't been feeling too well lately, but everything is fine now because..." No, that wouldn't do. Obi-wan chewed on a stylus and considered his problem. Arde-wan hadn't changed toward the Jedi, that was certain, and mentioning them would only complicate an already-delicate situation. Obi-wan could see how his father's fear had grown, so many things were clear now; he still wanted to share his new knowledge in hopes of easing other hurtful memories, but that would have to wait. When his father's temper had cooled, when they were together again on the *Star*, when Obi-wan had had time to gather all his facts

about further studies on Ves--or even Alderaan! Obi-wan laughed. Oh yes, all these new ideas were going to have to be most cleverly handled!

"Dear Per, I am not certain how to tell you how sorry I am to have angered you, but maybe I can explain it all when I am home. I know you will be surprised to hear me, of all people, say this, but my year on Rynan has almost been too much for me..."

//Obi-wan?//

Turning away from the postal comp, Obi-wan spotted the Jedi a way down the walk from the dormer. He waved enthusiastically and was a bit disappointed in the sober manner Zadexxet presented as the Jranikan neared.

Obi-wan was somewhat surprised to discover that Zadexxet's presence could still make him catch his breath, particularly when the huge half-Sith crossed his massive arms. "You look so solemn," he said without preamble. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not if there is nothing wrong with you."

"Oh! I'm fantastic, thanks to you. I--"

"How do you feel?"

"Like I think! Like every part of me is working together without having to ask the other parts permission." Obi-wan laughed at his imagery. "Like I've just made some alien planet and everything around me is new, but it isn't really, because I'm actually home. And I think I'll really go home now; go to Ves and look around; see what I remember of being there with Mem. And I think I'll visit the Enclave," he confided. "Maybe I could even study there."

"Oh, and do you now want to be a Jedi yourself, despite the dreadful wonders you knew last night?"

"But just studying there wouldn't make me a Jedi. I--"

"No, it would not. But you would discover yet more temptations, and I tell you, the longings you have felt and feared are only--"

"But I'm not afraid now!" What bothered the Jedi was beyond Obi-wan's understanding. He began to suspect that his initial wariness of the Jranikan had been partially grounded in the fact that Oxxler Zadexxet was a profoundly humorless man, just as Oyega claimed. "I know it's dangerous business, but--"

"But your destiny is not neces-

sarily tied to your talents. Your mother's wasn't."

"Ser Zadexxet." Obi-wan kept his voice tone polite, but he was beginning to get angry. "I really don't think I know enough about any of this to be deciding my destiny, as you call it, or anything else about forceful studies."

"Then take the advice of one who does know."

"And I'd like to make my own decisions, thank you. Ser Y'erkk'y'ko certainly thought I was good enough for the Jedi."

"Henke was not with us last night."

"Why do you say that? Nothing went wrong; there's no evil monster waiting to swallow me up. That was just a baby's dreams! I'm not afraid anymore."

"Henke is dead on Redants, Obi-wan. Ambushed by beings who plot against the peace of the Rim; beings of whom Henke was rightly afraid, although you in your wisdom do not fear dangers even greater."

The first shadow of his newly found life passed over Obi-wan, dimming his sun-bright confidence. "You knew," he said slowly. "You knew last night, didn't you? And you didn't tell me."

"A person picks and chooses his news. You would have run from me last night had I done so."

"And you want me to run from you now, don't you, and forget about everything Ser Henke said." He saw that his words struck Zadexxet like a blow, pleasing Obi-wan. How much of that inspiration was forcefully gained, he didn't know, but if the Jedi believed his talents were more sensitive than simple understanding, Obi-wan would not object. The implication that he was not adequate to the task violated his spirit and he rebelled.

"I am not questioning your intentions," the Jranikan objected, defensively. "A person's destiny does not necessarily lie at the end of wishes and wants, either. Sometimes one can only do what one must."

Obi-wan adjusted his satchel of comtapes. "This is really ironic, do you know? In a way, I can't believe it." He took several generous steps down the walkway then turned back to face Zadexxet. He stood, one fist on his hip, radiating all the disdain he could muster. "You're worse than my father."

Serene Star, orb. Jessera
6026.18.10

Dear Obi,

Of course, you are forgiven, just as, of course, I am now anxious to hear about what troubled you. This year has been long for everyone, hasn't it? I'm happy to hear you saw the Yametos. I don't actually remember their daughter, except as a small bundle, but I am certain Jze-wan is a delightful young woman, and am glad you chanced to meet her on her vacation. Where is she studying?

As I warned might happen, we will not be able to come to Rynan. Yverane will arrange transport for you; Endero-sep will have the details. I suspect we will meet at Ustella where I'm told there's a lively market for these stones I picked up on the Rim (once they are cured, that is).

Must run. We'll talk later. See you in two weeks.

All my love,

Per

"Well, there's the monk!" a high, thin voice called out across the lawn. Wryt waved knobby fingers at Obi-wan, motioning him over. "Going celebrating with us tonight? After the last few weeks of studying, you must be ready for some fun."

"Obi," Oyega confided, his muzzle close enough to Obi-wan's ear to tickle, "Skelt came into a bundle from a distant clanswoman. How about helping me relieve him of it?"

"Oyega, quit it!"

"Hey, what are you telling him, you mutt?" Skelt jostled the Y'kshirley. "How're you doing, Obi? Missed you."

"I've missed you, too. Honest. But between exams and catching up with my father's social obligations..."

"We'd noticed you were feeling better," Ata chimed in.

"...I'm going to have to decline Oyega's offer. My father's ship came in early and I'm leaving for Ustella in, oh, 3 measures."

"Iss thiss good-bye then, kit?" Femeli asked. "Or are you to endure another year here? I be off hunting come the twenty-sixth, but Kert or Sskelt could certainly be persuaded to wasste enough meassures to meet another term."

"Femeli, don't you flick your tail

at me like that!" Skelt cracked. "I'm not at all certain that this sensitive Vessan could stand more hardcore science."

"Or," Kert added, "that the discipline board could stand any more fine-tuned Vessan pranks!"

"Gentleones," Obi-wan intoned, bowing low with a dramatic sweep of his daycloak, "brevity is the secret of friendship."

"Listen to him! Will you listen to the pup!" Skelt whooped above laughter that was bittersweet for Obi-wan. For all that his attention could not be fully captured by astrophysics and the inner beauty of hyper-engines, for all the heartache his private trials had given him, he felt satisfied with his year on Ryman. He knew, also, how great a part of that reaction he owed to his friendship with this motley crew of assistants. He would miss them, and their--

Now, where would he be today?

Obi-wan froze. A whisper of recognition touched him, a new persona in the forceful congregation at the Academy, an aura he recognized but could not identify by name.

If I were Obi-wan where would I... perhaps still in the dorm...

"Obi? Obi! Sunlord, what's got into him now?"

He waved Wryt's question away. Stepping back from the group, he focused on the hint, tuning out the spectrum of personalities that peopled the Academy grounds, dimming the colors of the folk about, slipping by the varying intensities, hues and tones. Most were vaguely defined reflections of people who let the powers-that-be pass about and through them without comment, content to simply be one of the greater Force. A few stood out, those more specifically trained in some area, and, of course, there were the Jedi. Obi-wan carefully avoided intruding on the last, determined to meet his assurances to Zadexxet, but it was one of those auras, strong in the Force and gloriously eager, that had pricked his attention--

//Ta Alllyn!//

"What?" Ata asked.

"It's my uncle." Obi-wan did not quite believe it; he had never gotten around to writing, but still his uncle was here. Wonderful! "I haven't seen him since..." Obi-wan did not want to spoil his friends' good spirits with mention of funerals. "I have to go. I only have a couple of measures..." He looked at all of them, at the skull-faced Ptlmy, the Catten; at Ata, and Oyega; at Skelt and Kert, and wished he

could properly thank them. "It's good-bye, then, isn't it? Skelt, Ata, all of you. No, Wryt, I really don't think I'll be back. Femeli! Sweet sun, you remind me of my cousin Rebi with all your kissing! Save that for Skelt! I have to go--good-bye!"

//...Alllyn!//

There it was again. Alllyn Emarie knew he should recognize the voice, but he had always had a blind spot for identifying unexpected calls; his squad leader despaired of him often.

//Ta Alllyn!//

Oh! He heard the title this time and knew who it had to be. Happily he looked about the nearby crowd. *//Obi-wan? Where are you?//*

//Over here!//

//That far away?// Emarie watched the lanky figure running down the walkway toward him and shook his head; he should have remembered how good the boy had been at that as a child. As Obi-wan neared, he took a better look at his nephew and was further astounded. By the gods, he had best also remember that the boy was nearly 15!

"Obi!" He called out, meeting the boy with a hug of wookiee proportions. "I don't believe it. On my life, I couldn't figure out who that burst of energy was! Look at you! You're almost as tall as--wait a minute, you are as tall as I am! I was hoping to catch you still here; you can't imagine how frustrating it's been knowing you were here and not being able to get away to visit. How long do you have--what, today? Damn, never enough time. How long has it been? Six years? That obstinate father of yours... How are you feeling? Good, good. Yes, we must talk. Do you know a quiet place?"

"Why do you say I have to?" Obi-wan was grateful for the discreet placement of tables in the Callameloda's upper dining room; not only was his uncle an enthusiastic man, but if Emarie told Obi-wan he must do something, one more time, Obi-wan was going to zap Emarie mentally the same way he remembered Mem zapping him for misbehavior. Then there would certainly be a scene.

The Jedi put down his goblet. "Obi-wan, we're not talking about mere talents in design. We're talking about a gift that is worth more than all the crafts-folk put together! One doesn't have a choice--no, that's the wrong way to put it--one has a responsibility to use a talent that can be of such benefit."

"The Jranikan, Zadexxet, would tell you I have the responsibility not to use my talent."

"Oh, for--Obi-wan, I have the greatest respect for Masters like Lolek. I certainly am no match for them in wisdom. But they have their prejudices, too, like anyone else. Svarve was conquered by Vehenev and they all have an inborn fear of money and temporal power there. Be more discriminating; after all, Lolek did train a half-Sith, which raised more than a few eyebrows in the separation-of-powers crowd." Emarie waved off a server's offer of more sweets. "As I was saying, you're still young enough not to have acquired bad habits..." He looked about the luxurious dining room. "At least not forceful ones."

"Ta Allyn, I told you I'm not free--"

"You told me your father said you're not, and the rest is simply your stubborn reaction to my telling you what you should do. You're just like your mother, do you know? You haven't had time to think about it, that's all. When you were a little boy, you often spoke of being a Jedi."

"Just like my uncle?"

"Force, no! You're much more talented. I'll probably be serving under you before you're thirty. I'm just a working Jedi, Obi; you're special."

"I might have other things to do."

"Hmm, yes, Oxxler told me about some of the other things you do. A bit early to be starting out on the night life, don't you think? Isn't one Ende-deuc in the family enough?"

Furious, but reluctant to lose his temper with his newly-refound uncle, Obi-wan ignored the comment. "Per wants me--"

"On the other hand, aren't you a bit old to be hiding behind what Fadr says you must do and think and want?"

Obi-wan pushed his chair away from the table; his fingers were white and taut on the clear, molded edge. "The only thing I must do in life is strive to be charitable and just. My father taught me that, Uncle."

Emarie didn't move, didn't flinch from the reproach in Obi-wan's voice. "Your father is a good man to teach you that. But where is the charity in one who hoards his talent to himself? Where is the justice in denying that so very great part of Life that you have been granted?"

He was being played with again, being turned about to meet someone else's whim. Obi-wan was not interested in any truth that might lie in either Zadexxet's or

Emarie's claims; all he saw was a new demon come to harass him. "I will do what I want, uncle, when I want," he claimed. "If I choose not to study with the Jedi, it will not be because of Zadexxet's doubts; if I do study, it will not be because of you."

"Or your father?"

"If my father has been at fault in the same way, at least he is more honest than either of you. He does what he does because he loves me, not what I can or can't do." Obi-wan stood and collected his travel case. "My shuttle leaves in half-measure. Give my love to Ta Jelena and Ta Frayl." He palmed the control that would ready his bill at the maitre'd's desk. "I apologize for my impertinence, Ta Allyn. But you are too assuming. I will tell Per I saw you."

"Oh, you are your mother's son." Emarie stood also. "No, don't say anything. Just imagine what Arde will say... Obi, mind your temper. It is much like your mother's: quick and hurtful with words. Much like mine, too. We all inherited it from grandfadr Emarie for whom it never did any good at all. I would prefer to part as friends."

Obi-wan endured the embrace, accepting the wash of goodwill although he did not love his uncle at the moment.

Emarie did not seem to mind that absence terribly. "Off with you, then," he said gruffly. "There will be time enough for reconciliations later."

Uncomfortable with the comment, unable to deny the truth he read in its claim, Obi-wan left for his rendezvous with the *Serene Star*.

Frankly, Arde-wan Kenobi had expected a more effusive greeting from his son at their reunion on Ustella. The hearty hug and generous handshake had been fine, but somewhat less than satisfying. He would have preferred, say, a shouted, "Hie, Per!" from across the reception area, or perhaps a babble of endless sentences that wouldn't make sense until repeated again over dinner. He did not expect to find himself bereft because his son bestowed all his shouts and babbles on Galreath Warin, whom Obi-wan had spotted over Arde-wan's shoulder.

And what was Obi-wan doing, being tall enough to spot anyone over Arde-wan's shoulder?

"Are you certain this is the merchandise ordered a year ago?" Kenobi asked his secretary as they watched the young folk.

Yverane smiled. "I did point out his increase in clothing bills, Arde-wan. I

think all of us have forgotten how close he is to his manhood."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kenobi snapped. "He's fourteen."

"Fifteen in five weeks. And then sixteen, and before we are aware of it, I'll be drawing petit papers for him. He could use some more weight on him, though. Perhaps I ought to arrange for some exercise, dance, or maybe some body sports. One does need muscles to go with shoulders."

"Ridiculous," Arde-wan muttered, frowning as he watched Obi-wan and Galreath kiss. "That's enough of..." He was going to call out, break up the display, but the boy and girl suddenly found something to giggle about and just as suddenly were children again. Kenobi relaxed. *Just fifteen, after all, he thought. But, Wreyn, can it have been this long already? Three more years and he'll be free to marry; ten years and a man in all rights.* The thought was overwhelming. Arde-wan did not pursue it; Obi-wan was still so much a child; there was no need to hasten his youth.

"Father!"

"Don't swear, Obi. I am not really being funny about this. Listen: you're a young man now and I fully expect you to be honorable in your dealings with women." Arde-wan clasped his hands behind his back in an effort to maintain his stern posture, which was difficult considering the incredulity in his son's expression. "Galreath is an old friend and an affectionate girl. But you must not assume such behavior from others; and even old friends must not be taken for granted."

"But, Per..." Obi-wan stammered in his embarrassment. "Blinet and I just went beaching and out for New Year's. You're making a big thing out of nothing!"

"Am I now? Perhaps Nesve Faffston is given to hallucinations?"

"But, Blinet was the one who--"

Arde-wan held up a hand, not really interested in an accounting, privately quite satisfied with his son's lively interest in the opposite sex. He made a note to ask his cousin Gwhy-wan to arrange some social affairs at the estate; just picnics or such, of course, but it couldn't hurt to start introducing Obi-wan to some Vessan families. "As I said, Obi, one must be courteous, even with old friends."

Prepared for every subject of inquiry his father could raise over dinner, Obi-wan was taken by surprise by Arde-wan's

somewhat serious teasing on the question of his behavior with Gal or Blinet. He was also anxious to turn the conversation to more familiar grounds, albeit more dangerous ones; he had to raise the problem sometime and it might as well come up when Per was in such an annoyingly playful frame of mind.

"I saw Ta Allyn. He sends his regards."

Arde-wan did not drink from the brandy glass he had brought to his lips. "Emarie?" he said over the globe of cortac. "You didn't mention him in your letters, only the Jranikan and Brokovian."

"I only saw him today, before the shuttle left. We had dinner. We talked about Mem and Hala--"

"What?!" His father's painful reaction pressed against Obi-wan, reviving his own hauntings like a distant echo. Arde-wan's fears were still living, though, and Obi-wan longed to reach out to disarm them as Zadexxet had done for him.

"Per, it's all right. I don't--"

"Of course you don't remember. He's a fool to bring it up again." Arde-wan spoke briskly, as if he could keep ahead of his sorrow. "Obi, you haven't told me yet what happened on Rynan, but you must not let your uncle's indiscretion bother you."

"But, Per..."

"No, believe me. You'll only hurt yourself if you try to reconstruct--"

"Per, I know everything about Hala!" Obi-wan had to shout to be heard, startling both himself and Arde-wan. "I went to the Jedi and asked them to help me. The dreams got too bad, Per, and I was doing things--"

"Everything about Hala?"

He had known, all the time he had known! In one word, Arde-wan told Obi-wan that there had been no mystery at all to his hidden, inner self. In one word lived five years of denial. As surely as he read the truth in his uncle's good-bye, Obi-wan read the commission in his father's question; Arde-wan had always known what Obi-wan might one day discover and would always oppose that other self. The realization saddened Obi-wan, enraged him, then left to skulk about the corners of his mind when he refused to accept it.

"Per, it's good what I know! Yes, everything, but now I know what I can do and I don't feel like a baby, like a puppet with some unseen owner."

"Did Emarie try to get you to go back to Alderaan with him?"

"Per, I told Ta Allyn I just couldn't--"

"Of course, you can't. Your abilities belong to the allya and the Company."

"I thought they belonged to me! And I wouldn't have known most of them if the Jedi hadn't shown me--"

"The Jedi had no right to show you anything!"

That skulking realization flared. "And you shouldn't have left me blind to what I was for five years!"

"Oh no, Obi-wan, you did that yourself and were happy enough with it until that Jranikan intruded."

"I want to go home."

His father, caught off-guard, started. "You what?"

"I want to go home for once. I want to talk with the people I used to talk with; I want to remember more about Mem; I want to go to the Enclave there."

"No." With a deliberate precision of movement, Arde-wan put the goblet he held back on the dining table. "No," he repeated. "There are matters you must attend to here, at my side. When you are a man, then you can dabble in philosophy and party tricks."

Obi-wan recalled his harsh words to Allyn Emarie and flushed. "You're just like them, aren't you? Telling me what I have to do." He could barely hide the tears of betrayal that came to his eyes. "Give me a chance at least; I want to know what I can do, not what I can't."

"There is nothing you can't do, Obi. Except this. You have one path, the Jedi have another. They do not merge."

"You sound like Zadexxet. I don't want people trying to run me like some simple loading droid!"

"Father! Now you sound like Ende!" Arde-wan cut the air with the edge of his hand. "You may not go to the Enclave, Obi, no! Not even for lay studies."

"But Mem already taught me--"

"Your mother was in full agreement with me on this!"

Obi-wan recoiled hastily from the wave that roared from his father at the mention of Wreyn Emarie. "But Mem was only worried that I'd misuse--"

"No, no more of this! I don't want

to hear about this again!" Arde-wan strode swiftly to the door, the violence held in check within his aura muting any further protest Obi-wan could have made. "There will be no more Jedi in this line of the allya," he said as the hall opening slid back. "No more, Obi, I promise you."

Galreath knocked at Obi-wan's cabin wall. She had heard of the argument; could she help? Obi-wan scowled to remember the enforced intimacy of shipboard life. "Make me free to do as I please," he replied.

"Sorry, Obi, shall I come back when we're 18?"

The ship's captain and second engineer stopped by to pay their regards on his return, but he was too disturbed to talk.

When Yverane called to insure the cabin had been in order for Obi-wan's homecoming and left no message from the Main, Obi-wan knew the extent of his father's displeasure. Only when the boundaries of parental patience were completely breached did Arde-wan Kenobi not look to his son's comforts himself and forgo the evening's farewells.

Eventually, Obi-wan rolled over on his bed, noted the time, and supposed he ought to try to sleep. Still on aux time, he lay awake while the ship slept, but however many measures he worried his problems, he was no closer to any solutions.

His anger had ebbed; he could not help but see his own old miseries reflected in Arde-wan's eyes and forgive; and although he might condemn his father's assumption of control...well, was Per any different from Ta Allyn or Zadexxet, the Jedi he had sought to learn from?

Why was it such an either/or dilemma? And why did he think he could make a fair judgment himself? Henke had been right; he knew little about the Jedi beyond newsclips and the bromides shared by commonfolk everywhere. How did he know the Order and its ways wouldn't be more boring than the Company's?

Obi-wan winced. He had thought that about the allya business, hadn't he?

He sat up cross-legged on the mattress. It was clearly time for some serious reeducation. He was, after all, a year away from the *Serene Star* and its business. What he had looked at with a child's eye before, might appear different now. He had to keep an open mind.

And he had to begin some research of his own--free of unwanted suggestion--on

the Jedi. His tutor on Brokaw could recommend the philosophic sources, and the reader service on Whillhum was expensive at this distance, but not terribly so. He ought to find someone to talk to, a Jedi preferably, but someone unbiased. The Jedi on Ves, he reluctantly admitted, would probably be too aware of his father's reticence. Perhaps someone on Alderaan, someone who might remember him well enough to respond to a polite letter, but who would be distant enough to be objective. He thought a moment. His uncle had mentioned a name, a Deseratine galactic translate, someone he had obviously respected, yet did not appear to be overly-friendly with. Shitaki. Obi-wan scribbled the name on a filmnote from the shelf beside his bed. He had heard often enough the legends about how unlikely folk came to be Jedi and heroes. He saw no reason why a somewhat more orthodox petition wouldn't work as well.

That he had somehow travelled the way from studies with the Jedi to being one himself occurred to Obi-wan and he laughed to himself. One day, Obi-wan Kenobi, you will trip over your own ambitions, he told himself as he dimmed the room's lights and settled into the warmers, content to know he had rescued some order out of the day's disruptions. When he had looked more closely at this life his father had mapped out for him, when he had learned more of forceful ways and had discovered a way to help his father relinquish all the hurtful memories of Hala, then they would talk of his future.

Today had just been the trauma of yet another beginning, after all.

Arde-wan Kenobi sat at his desk late into the rest period. Pieces of film were scattered about his elbows, notes filled with reminders, admonitions to himself, drawings and random lines that somehow traced his thoughts.

He had left a child behind and had returned to discover a young man in his place, a youth with a look in the eye that Arde-wan had not seen since the day he had vowed that light would never be lit again.

Still too disturbed to talk with Obi-wan, Arde-wan let the evening greeting slip past. Perhaps if he were stern with the boy, if he closed off all paths of inquiry from the beginning... Kenobi tossed down his stylus, disgusted with his thoughtless panic at dinner. Very well. Obi-wan had rediscovered his childhood interest in the Jedi. Obi-wan had always been a dreamy child for all his boisterousness, and had a sense of compassion Arde-wan had privately found great pride in. Naturally, the boy would at some time become interested in the more esoteric aspects of life.

And for the Father's sake, Kenobi, that's not his only interest! Why aren't you getting upset about those bills he ran up at the Callameloda, or that precocious interest he's showing in girls? You don't want a wastrel on your hands, either, or some hasty, ill-advised mating for him!

But in his heart Kenobi knew these other worries were simply passing storms; Obi-wan could muster quite a formidable sense of purpose when he wanted something badly enough, and had always been able to forgo a present pleasure for a future return. If he got it into his head that he wanted to be a Jedi...

If he did. Arde-wan reminded himself that his son had only asked to be allowed to relearn what Wreyn had taught so many years ago. And for all the influence one year in proximity to Jedi might have, Arde-wan had the boy's whole life. He glanced down at the film that held a tentative schedule for Obi-wan's coming year: with the *Serene Star* until the 30th, then off to Om for two sessions as page for Senator White; after that, back with Arde-wan until a possible stay at the university on Urt to study with the Company's bankers over a year from now. And, he mustn't forget, a trip or two back to Ves to introduce the boy to some of the better families with daughters.

Arde-wan shook his head at the idea of Obi-wan courting, then frowned and changed the starting date on Om to the 40th week. If Obi-wan was going to flirt with a man's interests at 15, then he had best learn a man's duties, too, and at his father's side, for as long as possible, in the protective world of the Company's interests.

* * *

PART THREE

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Arde-wan Kenobi was known for nothing if not his spectacular parties; any number of excuses to celebrate could be found in any business's life, but the combination of Midyear and young Obi-wan Kenobi's natal day anniversary had always meant a special gala for friends and customers of the great allya Kenobi Company.

High above the southern port of Commenor's vast continental trade city, intricate housing platforms floated. Atop the most elaborate, music played and guests laughed for measures that Midyear day before the sun finally sank from view and the heavens above were lit with the glory of a

peaceful galaxy.

Whenever he felt his attention drifting from his guests to his personal troubles, Arde-wan would look to the distant suns to restore his perspective and calm his troubled mind.

"Whenever I become too cynical in my business, this is what keeps me believing."

"Am, excuse me?"

The Jesseran who had come to Arde-wan's side waved a graceful hand across the starscape. "As long as we can be distracted by that, no matter the evil I see, I have faith in sentience. To know that we all recognize the greater forces gives me comfort."

"R'Yellen," Kenobi smiled, "such philosophy so late in the day?"

"I have been dealing with Agents all week, Arde," she said, exhaling deeply. "I need philosophy."

R'Yellen drifted away eventually. Kenobi watched her go, attempting to further distract himself in an appreciation of her generous sexuality, but her words had struck too closely at his heart's worry. He did not need any reminder of what greater forces there were in the galaxy; he was losing too important a battle against them.

He scanned the room for his son, an exercise so automatic he was not conscious of it. He found Obi-wan amidst some girdelli, the cavene brown folk swaying like thin reeds about the boy, laughing at some joke. At moments like this, when Obi-wan glittered with the galaxywide education Arde-wan had given him, his wit sharp but generous, his sincerity perhaps a touch intense but never intrusive, his self-confidence so well-founded that others looked to him for support; at times like this, Arde-wan almost forgot the differences between them, the sharp, intent look that sparked in the boy's azure eyes when they argued.

Tonight there seemed to be a special glow about this son of his who was nearly a man, a radiance that caught the eye of every guest. Arde-wan watched the tall, slim body as it moved on to talk with others, noting how easily it rested within the oregon tunic Obi-wan had chosen to wear, how the young, broad shoulders filled the shimmercloth undersweater to perfection. His son had impeccable taste; from finely-cut slacks and slippers of softest Heildie leather, to jewelry that was subtle perfection, Obi-wan Kenobi was an image of well-tempered sophistication even to the eyes of a father who expected nothing less.

Om did that much for him, Arde-wan

thought, remembering how Obi-wan had stood out among the other pages in the Senate, others who somehow never looked so brilliant, or carried themselves with such grace. Obi-wan had not liked his stay at Center, but Arde-wan could not see any harm evident in the boy from the visit there. He made a small smile for the stars above as he remembered that gloriously indulgent New Year's at the Presidential Estates. Obi-wan had invited both Blinet Faffston and Galreath; what a guide he had been for a first-hand view of life at Center...

...life at Center had been like this, Obi-wan thought as he stopped at a buffet laden with desserts from a hundred worlds. He felt his father's attention and ignored it, accustomed to the ever-present gaze. Per's opinions were an endless tape that ran on in his mind, a flow of thoughts that came to him unwilled, unwelcome. He endured the obsessive concern patiently, aware of its honest foundation, much as he had endured the parties on Om, the constant socializing and entertainment that was not entertainment but work, the middlestructure of the bureaucracy that kept the Republic functioning. He simply turned to his studies for comfort when the pressures became maddening. Arde-wan had not approved of his attentions to the more scholarly levels of Centerlife, but Per had not forbidden Obi-wan's participation in historical discussion groups, nor his wish to work with the cautionary groups that advised the Senate; Arde-wan Kenobi had never thought the Senate inviolate. His father had only preferred that Obi-wan spend more of his time away from the chattering idealists, and closer to those who worked with the bills of law and ways of commerce, thoughts that still rang painfully clear to Obi-wan.

And Per had not been the only one unsympathetic. Obi-wan thought of that New Year's celebration and sighed to remember that Blinet had been too dazzled by the vast complexity of Om to discuss its workings intelligently, and that Galreath had understood it too well, revelling in the power and pleasures...

...And Arde-wan had not been displeased to see how Om had weaned Obi-wan from his childhood friends. The changes he had watched his son endure in that area were aligned with the plans Arde-wan had made for introducing Obi-wan to the daughters of the great allyas on Ves. After, of course, Obi-wan relinquished his determination to visit with the Jedi there. Then, oh then, there would be such parties as Ves had never...

...Ves had never birthed such a beauty, Obi-wan thought as Damillia deftly Ha'Donago passed, her wavy, jet-black hair pinned and combed about her golden shoulders like an iron-wrought frame for her delicately painted face. But even as he noticed her exotic allure, his mind rearranged her appearance, bringing the sunset-blue of her gown to her eyes, gilding her hair with the gold of her skin, transforming that black mass of hair into the layers of floating veils and silks Nanyebn, lovely Nanyebn of the flaxen hair and skyblue eyes, had been forced to wear...

...but, thank the Father, Arde-wan nodded, *those two girls relieved him of natural curiosity before making Vehenev and meeting that Zakrefske minz, Nanyebn Irinevna!* He saw Obi-wan eye the Ha'Donaga heir and hoped the boy remembered his manners. Not that he decried having such a virile son, but he had never guessed where such hopes might lead. If he hadn't taken Obi to Vehenev...no, Arde-wan dismissed that if; there were others more instrumental in that travesty of a courtship so recently resolved. If Prince Rgegor and his scheming brother hadn't thrown their sister at Obi-wan in such an obvious play for the upper hand in their dealings with the Company... If Obi-wan had not chosen that girl to demonstrate his stubbornness with... If Arde-wan had only looked past his business to see what was happening between the youngsters...

Oh, what a troublemaker that girl had been! Defying her planet's rules of order, breaking her mourning of the old Prince, practicing her wiles on a boy who did not understand Vehenev's primitive rules of wooing... Arde-wan wasn't one to monitor his son's correspondence; how could he have known the children plotted an illicit first love rendezvous, or that the elder brothers had exercised their barbaric reach of control to breach Nanyebn's privacy? He fervently wished he had been there when Rgegor had burst upon the two, not that he doubted Obi-wan's protestations of innocence, but first-hand evidence would have been so nice to have...

Well, it was over. And there was satisfaction to be found in knowing Obi-wan would not be at all difficult to guide into marriage. *Though never to that Zakrefske girl, whatever the Prince Zakrefske said...*

...what the Prince Zakrefske said had been abominable, and when it flashed in Obi-wan's mind, he looked away from Damillia, daughter of Hoh where the standards of conduct for young females were even more hypocritically enforced than on Vehenev. As always, sadness and rage mixed uncomfortably in Obi-wan whenever he was

reminded of Nanyebn Irinevna Zakrefske. He would never see her again; their first kiss was their last, and Obi-wan's honor had become something priced by businessmen determined to trade their sister's reputation for part of the Kenobi market.

Bah! He had done nothing wrong, nothing but fall in love with a girl condemned to a culture that-- Obi-wan forced the rage to subside. Each world was free to live as it best could within the universe; he knew that and repeated that to himself over and over whenever his heart ached. Their romance had been doomed from the start; Ves and Vehenev could never mix and it was not his place to condemn. Obi-wan sighed heavily and helped himself to another helping of cremecoated softcake. At least Nanye had been impressed with what he had taught himself of forceful ways...

...still, Arde-wan comforted himself, *the boy had learned a lesson in reality.* A discordant sound caught his ear and he frowned. Two guests, an Aguent named Terlin and a Lucefen with the Trade Board, had begun to argue. Arde-wan stepped down from his platform, discarding his glass as he hurried across the room, but when he came to the main flooring, he saw Obi-wan step politely between the guests, saw his son speak quietly but firmly with them. The tension evaporated; Arde-wan could feel it vanish across the room. But he was not happy; had Obi-wan given Terlin a look too intense? Had the boy's eyes met the Lucefen's with too commanding a presence? It did neither of them good to be paranoid, Arde-wan knew, but he also knew how deftly Obi-wan commanded the Force now. He did not approve of such behavior with his guests. He did not approve of such behavior at any time for Obi-wan.

Authority: his son had to have it. But how to teach Obi-wan the respected boundaries when such greater-than-natural perceptions were there to call on? For any other parent, the solution would have lain with the Jedi who were charged with the caretaking of such talents, required to direct them for the profit of all. But Arde-wan remembered his brother-in-law's dreams, and he knew his son's desires; the Jedi would not simply service Obi-wan, they would make a sacrifice of him. The task was Arde-wan's alone; the example set must come through him and no one else...

"Per, can I help?"

They were on Vehenev, their first trip there after the old Prince had died, and the atmosphere of grief became too great for Arde-wan to bear. Obi-wan went to his father, touched him without warning, reached into him on an errand of mercy that with

youthful enthusiasm and blindness laid bare more than Arde-wan could endure. Arde-wan had shaken him and scolded him angrily enough to have brought the whole household running had the mansion been as open as a Vessan house...

Obi-wan left the quarreling business behind, uneasy in his victory as he recalled that time on Vehenev. He was grateful his father did not come nearer; Arde-wan would do more than scold if there were the slightest suspicion that Obi-wan had imposed his own will on the Aguent and Lucefen. Per just didn't understand what a suggestion of an artful kind could alter, didn't believe that Obi-wan, too, had his standards. Per was full of talk about what Obi-wan could and could not do as if words could make him oblivious to what he perceived; as if wishes could make him as blase as commonfolk. He would have never done...

...anything to endanger the girl, Arde-wan knew, but since coming back from Urt Obi-wan had been so full of Jedi that nothing short of assault could stop him in his demonstrations. Galreath, for all her galaxywide knowledge, could not have known the extent of the powers employed to make Obi-wan's surplus battleglows dance so prettily. She would never have to think about the temptations the forceful confronted when exploring their abilities--Wreyn had warned her husband so many times!--and she would never know the wall of anger Arde-wan had faced when alone with...

...Obi-wan defied his father then, and denied Arde-wan's ability to judge what he could not manipulate. And when he demonstrated what greater skills he sought to accomplish, when he demanded to know by what right Arde-wan restricted him, Arde-wan Kenobi struck him for his arrogance and he had not spoken civilly to Per for weeks.

Obi-wan looked away into a planting because his face still flushed whenever he remembered the scathing letter Shitaki had sent him, decrying his behavior, suggesting that perhaps it was best he shelve his study of the Order if such was his notion of the use of power. But he hadn't truly meant to sound that way...he glanced back at the Aguent and Lucefen, suddenly certain that he had overstepped himself again, had committed some terrible blinding of their minds...but the businessers were talking, albeit not as cordially as preferred at a party, with competition, not fury, in their eyes. It was only that he was frustrated and his temper...

...was something to be trained. As

were his habits, trained and tempered until they served the Company's needs. One year. That was all the time left to encourage those habits and bind his son to his side. In one turn of the galactic clock, the boy turned eighteen and reached his petit majority. By Obi-wan's word, and Arde-wan respected that word fiercely, Obi-wan would leave for some Enclave, whatever his father's wishes. Arde-wan could threaten, had threatened, to disown Obi-wan, but money would not bring this one back; Arde-wan knew his son too well to hope Obi-wan would prove as weak as Ende-deuc. Eighteen and the boy would be gone.

One year.

Arde-wan had watched his son grow, had made note of Obi-wan's habits. The boy liked power, in whatever definition given that word, just as the boy wanted a gracious life and lovers who were sweet. His habits were clearly limned out; all he needed was someone to encourage him in the same until his pleasures became too engrained to put aside, until he craved just enough to turn aside his dreams.

Kenobi drank more deeply from his glass than he normally allowed himself at such functions. He would be his son's seducer, if necessary, whatever the taste such a title left in his mouth. He had begun the task two years ago. *Seven years ago?* Tonight, when the game was so dangerously near to being lost, he would continue the fight even into the most desperate round.

"I'm still pinching myself and telling myself it's true. But I don't believe it. Even if I haven't been bounced out yet. Dear brother of mine, tell me: to what do I owe this honor?"

The voice startled Arde-wan. He turned in confusion and his guest sputtered and laughed ungraciously. Emptying the better half of a wineglass, the tall, rakish man cleared his throat and laughed again.

"Arde, if I had a holoscope here, I'd preserve that expression for all posterity! What's wrong? Did you forget you invited me, or did that wimp of an Omnan secretary you've got convince you some mistake had been made in inviting me?" Ende-deuc Kenobi waved vaguely toward Yverane who stood close by, watching with obvious distaste. "Come, come, brother," the younger Kenobi said, wrapping an arm about Arde-wan's shoulder. "Let us hug and kiss and make up and be good friends forever more."

Other guests had noticed the reunion, much to Arde-wan's distress. "Will you keep your voice down?" he hissed. "You always have to put on a show, don't you? At least you had the decency to dress appropriately."

"Brother, you insult me. I'm the best-dressed human in Downport. It is congenitally impossible for a Kenobi to be poorly turned out, did you know that? Not bad, eh?" Ende-deuc turned about gracefully, his evening cape rustling softly on the cleanly tailored tunic he wore over a silk blouse. He bowed slightly, removing his soft weaverfelt hat, sweeping it past his precisely creased pants. The brooch that secured his hushmetal belt sparkled as he straightened. "And, no," he said in answer to Arde-wan's sharp look at the jewel, "that bauble's not Kenobi-made, so you can stop squinting at it. One can't be picky over one's boodle, can one? I really should have worn the blaster, though; it's silver-plated and--"

Arde-wan reacted with all the startled horror his brother could have hoped for. Ende-deuc laughed broadly; Kenobi cursed himself for his gullibility and signalled for more wine. *Why*, he berated himself soundly, *do you keep hoping he'll change?*

"But now, why don't you tell me what you want, Arde? And don't look so surprised. I know my invitation didn't come from the depths of your brotherly love."

"You make it sound like I hate you. Which I don't."

"Does it matter?"

"Dammit, as a favor for your brother!"

"Tsk, ts, Arde. I'm a better businessser than that. There's no reason for either of us to do each other favors, so why should I--"

"To keep your dividends coming in then."

Ende-deuc snapped his attention away from a passing woman and glared at Arde-wan. "Try and break Per's will and I'll have this Company from you."

"Or to keep me from turning you in on that old military desertion charge. Per never did settle it, you know; the official he bribed retired years ago."

Ende-deuc helped himself to the win that appeared on a server's tray. "Just have to keep flogging the old horrors, don't you?"

"Only so long as you keep flogging the old arguments, Ende."

Ende-deuc started to speak, then made a face and looked away. "That your boy over there?"

"Yes, and that's what--"

"Hmf. Skinny as the rest of us, I see. Dressed pretty enough. Haven't spared any expense on him, have you? Absolutely scintillating," Ende-deuc sneered. "Dammit, Arde, when I was his age, I was manning a back-fired engine and fighting off Sith legionnaires! Chatting daintily with businessers and girls barely old enough to look cross-eyed at boys is some education!"

Damillia was back at Obi-wan's side. "Hardly an ingenue," Arde-wan murmured, frowning at the intimacy the girl was determined to initiate with Obi-wan. "As for barely being old enough, you should have met the Karatzev girl he fell in with this past year."

"Hmm, yes, I heard about that."

Kenobi looked askance at his younger brother. "How--"

"Arde, you think I didn't know about that lousy deal you made with the new Prince? Downport hears all the gossip, dear brother. Zakrefske's people were bragging all over how he'd made the Company scramble by hitting you with that honor claim. You should have married him to her."

"What? My only child, married into that barbaric society? I'm told they locked the girl up for months in some religious tower. Besides, there wasn't any cause for a marriage."

"Not the way Zakrefske tells it."

"He only kissed her!"

"Which is the next best thing on Vehenev."

"Only when it's to their advantage. Why, those men keep concubines in the same house with their wives!"

"Diversity, Arde, remember what old Tutor Efn-oct taught us about diversity."

"Hypocritical middleworld--well, it's done and over with. We didn't do that badly. They were grasping at anything. I told Obi that the Prince had probably put that vixen up to it. I just wish the boy weren't so interest--no, I don't." Kenobi stopped so suddenly, Ende-deuc backed up a step.

"Bro," the outlaw Kenobi said warily. "You're thinking, and that's dangerous."

Arde-wan ignored Ende-deuc. He motioned toward a private spot by the window, and when his brother didn't move, took the silken arm and steered Ende-deuc forcibly away from the other guests. "I want to talk to you, Ende. My reason for inviting you, remember?"

* * *

Damillia was pleasant company and a welcome diversion from his brooding over his father's hawk-eyed attention, but Obi-wan had been burned too recently by complicated alien mores. He kept his small talk noncommittal and did not have to feign regret when the charming, but dangerous, Hovite girl moved on. He sighed. The loss of such a pleasant diversion fueled his restlessness and he began to circle the room again. Perhaps something substantial to eat, and different company. But the talk at the meats table was of business, which he had had his fill of, or of more personal affairs, which reminded him of Nanyebln.

What could he do next? And he had to do something more engrossing than endure this party, or he would surely self-destruct. Loading a plate with enough food to distract him from such thoughts and filling a glass with enough brandy to enforce a mellow mood, Obi-wan prowled the party room.

"Hold up there, dammit. Give a man time to catch up!"

Obi-wan paused. The voice did not sound like one of the guests, and when he reached behind himself to read the presence of the stranger, the aura was distinctly discordant with its surroundings. Best to be careful, though; he assumed his best Company face and manner, certain guarantee against social blunders, and faced his hailer.

"Well?!" The man smiled broadly, his arms held out affectionately. He was Vessan, that much was certain, despite a distinctly unhomeworldlike air of danger about him. Beyond that odd assessment, Obi-wan was lost. "You don't recognize me," the man stated, disappointed at first, then amused. "Of course, you don't! I was in blue last time you saw me, all starched up and proper. Color looks terrible on me, believe it. Boy, I'm your Ta Ende!"

Precariously keeping his plate and glass upright under the sudden assault of a full embrace and back-pounding, Obi-wan wondered what in Center Ende-deuc Kenobi was doing at a Company party?!

"Well, Ta Ende..." Obi-wan shrugged himself free of the familial greeting. "Actually, I don't remember you in uniform either. I do think I saw you once on Rynan with some Corellians."

"When?"

"Ah, some time late 30s in 6025."

"Right. I was flying with the *Endeavor* crew then. They're gone now; got caught short by customs outside Ile last year. Father's fire! Took a bundle to

bribe my way out of that charge! Those courts feed the slavers of Hoh!"

"Slavers? Really?"

"Sure. It's a big galaxy, Obi; law can't be everywhere."

"And I don't suppose this getting 'caught short' had anything to do with Per advancing you your dividends last year?"

Ende-deuc graced his nephew with a surprised expression. "Now what ever gave you that idea, Obi?"

* * *

Still, Ende couldn't resist a quick look across the room to find his brother. *If the boy told... Actually, it's a wonder Arde didn't ask about that earlier. Not really a bad sort, Arde, if you don't push him too far.*

"I can't imagine," the boy was answering. "But don't worry, I won't tell."

"Very charitable of you, Obi-wan," Ende declared, throwing an arm around the boy's back. *Maybe the kid's redeemable,* he thought as he led Obi-wan off to a corner seat, waylaying a fresh bottle of wine along the way, *even if the father isn't.*

* * *

"...and then--are you following this?--then Uffen trips over Pyet and the whole damn servitor comes down over both of them! Took us two measures to get them out!" Ende watched his nephew lay back on the cushions and whoop with laughter. He poked him back to attention. "I'm not finished. Then Gorst--I tell you, you haven't lived till you meet that crazy dragon. Just out of the egg and a triple-delph scrapper!--then Gorst comes in with the village law enforcer in tow and--

"And all of you get hauled off to the jail!"

"So fast no customs ship could see you, let alone catch you! But get this: he says since I started the fight, I'm the only one guilty and that my punishment was to take his job until the next poor sap came along!"

"What?"

"They have this law that says all felons have to turn around and become lawficers!"

"Oh, come on, Ta!"

"Honest! He'd been up for breaking and entering. And I had to spend five frigging weeks wiping good citizens' noses before--"

"You?! No, that's too incredible--"

"--before I could get out of that sumphole. And just when I round up this drunken Corellian to take my place, the town Elder's daughter comes up and pins a paternity charge on me! Me, sterile six ways to New Year, and her a third degree removed humanoid. Father! I tell you, if those folk are only third degree removed, I'm a greenback's bastard baby boy! Me, a father? I told her my name's Kenobi, but did she listen?"

Obi-wan sat up and wiped at his eyes. "Hey, that sort of thing isn't funny. All I did on Vehenev was hug a friend drowning in two-year-old mourning clothes and whap! Her brothers are all over me crying, 'seduction'!"

"Yeah, I heard about that. Kind of stupid, if you ask me, fooling around with a Karatzev girl."

"Stupid! I'll tell you who's stupid, that bear of a brother of hers, Rgegor Ignazivitch or whatever. Barbaric planet."

"You could have ended up married to that barbarian."

Obi-wan sat back, his long legs spread lazily in front of Ende. "Oh no, Per knows how to handle connivers like the Zakrefske brothers."

"If the Prince had primed his sister better and hadn't been so anxious to screw the Company, there wouldn't have been anything Arde could have done and still save face."

"Oh, you, too," the boy complained. "Well, I'll tell you what I told everyone else: Nanye wouldn't do something like that, and I ought to know. I'm not too bad at reading folk, you know."

"Hey, kid, don't take it personally," Ende patted Obi's knee. "All Vehenev women are clever fems; it's the only way they can get a bit of their own. And if you were reading anything in that girl, it was her own straightforward, honest, underhanded desire to wed, bed and saddle you with her marvelous presence forever more. They live a bit longer than we do, y'know." Ende pulled a leafrol from a hidden pocket. "You're quite a catch, Obi: healthy, rich."

"Yes, and Per's been offering me to every healthy, rich girl on Ves, not that I've met any of them yet."

Ende chuckled. "Arde will probably live longer than Per did, true, but you'll come into your own soon enough. I won't stand in your way, and the galaxy knows Arde'll do anything for you."

"Right," Obi-wan said sarcastically, his mood shifting deeper into solemnity.

Ende lit the leafrol and let the aroma of the leaves fill the air about them before speaking. A nearby flock of Brokovians clucked in annoyance and moved off, but the boy seemed mildly appreciative. "Obi," he began, "Father knows I've got nothing against enjoying life, but if you don't keep your eyes open out there, if you don't watch the deals folk make, they'll take you for a patsy every time. Thinking the best of people is fine, but it's a fool's game."

"Oh no, Uncle, no more lectures on the necessities of life." He started to stand. "Excuse me, Ta Ende, but I think Per has better credentials for that role."

"Sit down."

Ende gave the boy points for recognizing a threat when he heard one. Obi-wan sat and eyed him warily.

"I hear you're planning on running off to join the Jedi. Courteous of you to warn Arde first." Ende put up a hand to forestall what he knew would be a long and boring defense. "Please, I don't need your lecture. I've met enough Jedi to know that scam. Are you serious, dead serious, about it? Just yes or no, please."

"Yes."

"Even if he disowns you? No credits, no passes? Ziltch?"

"I don't care--"

"All right, all right, no expositions on your moral superiority to money, either. And if you go off, cut off completely, and the Jedi won't take you? They don't accept everyone, you know. And you have the start of a reputation, Obi, not to mention some bad habits. And I don't mean the carousing and wenching. Jedi, to the best of my experience, and I've fought with some of the best, don't generally talk so high-handed about other folk's ways; and they usually try to listen to folk when there's serious talking to be done."

"Jedi aren't perfect," the boy insisted, although it was obvious from his face that Ende had not been the first to raise these points with him.

"No, they're not. Nobody is, but a person expects a Jedi to work a little harder at it."

"I know." The voice was very soft. "Shitaki sends me tapes and tapes complaining about my impatience."

"Shitaki? Greenback with the

Alderaan outfit?"

"Yes, but--"

"Your father knows you correspond with her?"

"No, but--"

"I'll be damned. Fought with her when I was still in service. One sharp fem, that. It figures, don't you know, if a Kenobi was going to write for advice to a Jedi, he'd write to the Enclave Captain. Did Emarie set you up with her?"

"She's the Enclave Captain?"

"You didn't know?"

Obi shook his head incredulously.

"Shows to go you, don't it? And that's what I mean, Obi, a Jedi--a good one, and I'll admit there are some that really raise my hair 'cause they're not at all anywhere near perfect--doesn't put on airs or forget he's just like you or me." Ende sat back to enjoy his smoke for a few minutes, exhausted by the staunch morality of this talk. He didn't envy Arde his fatherhood at all; this was too much like work.

Obi-wan seemed distracted now, and Ende figured it was a good time to bring up the real reason for this exchange. The boy would squawk like a gondark when he heard; better to start off slow. "Obi, you have any idea why Arde asked me, his wastrel brother, here tonight? I didn't think so. Well, it seems you really have him running scared with all this Jedi talk, and, seeing as Arde's always wanted to enlist me in something, he's grasping at any hope he can drum up. So, tonight, my boy, the troops are falling out to the sound of 'Let's all talk Obi out of joining the Jedi'."

"You? That doesn't make sense."

"Smart ass. Sure it does. You're a young man with a taste for the fine things in life. That cortac you're drinking for instance, or this fancy smoke you've been eyeing. Those pretty girls. Jedi don't really go much for excess, whatever the rumors say. Your father figures if he fills your cup just a bit too full, you'll give up all those idealistic notions Jedi do go for. So he called for me, the Kenobi family's prime example of overfilled cups."

"That's reprehensible!"

"No. That's your father trying to save you from a fate worse than working. And he's a damn sight better at it than my Per, who wasn't above dragging me out of cantinas by the hair. Of course, I was a lot more susceptible to offers of hard cash. Kept me hanging on the Company to my

full majority, he did. I don't suppose you're willing to wait till you're 25?"

"I will not!" The boy was sitting upright again, a classic picture of every young buck Ende had ever seen grow indignant in the face of his elders' manipulations. "And if you're going to tell me what I can and can't do, you can forget it right now. I'm sick and tired of people telling me what I must and mustn't do. I'll be whatever I damn well please and no one will stop me. I've got nearly ten years to make up for, ten years he tried to keep me from what I've got the talent to do, and if I have to go out like a beggar, I will. If I were an artist, he wouldn't stop me from creating; if I were a lawyer, I'd be on Bestine now. Well, I have a talent to use the Force, and by the Father, I will use it!"

"My, arrogant little brat, aren't you?"

* * *

Obi-wan felt his towering structure of defiance tumble about him. He sank back on the cushions, momentarily defeated by yet another repetition of Shitaki's assessments. Sometimes, listening to himself, he wondered why she bothered with him; he wondered if Zadexet hadn't been right after all about his suitability for the Order. "No," he said shakily, "no, I don't mean to sound like that. It's just--I'm drowning here and the only way to stay alive is fight. I finally looked around myself, around the worlds outside the Company, and all I saw was people needing help, help I could give because I'm more sensitive to the Force than other folk. I have to use my talents, Ta Ende; I couldn't live with myself if I didn't. I get so angry sometimes! I remember what it was like before Mem died, and then I think how long it took me to rediscover myself and... there's a girl I met, Jze-wan Yameto, who's as old as I am but who's been at an Enclave for five years! It's so frustrating, I--" Obi-wan looked down at his fists, made an exasperated sound and let his fingers hang loose. "Fine Jedi, eh? Getting angry and wanting to hit something?"

"I think I mentioned that Shitaki was pretty good fighter."

"But the wars are over; the Sith can't fight anymore. Of course, after centuries of battle, everyone thinks of the Jedi as warriors. But there are others than knights in the Order. We should emphasize those other talents, share them more with people who now just shrug and say 'that's Jedi business'. We have the time now. We'll have the means, too; the galaxy is getting richer every year. We should work at creating not just a group of folk dedicated to Life, but a universe so involved. I've thought and thought--"

"Whoa! Spare me Jedi thinking!"
Ende-deuc waved his leafrol about.
"Enthusiasm I can understand; the rest is a bit deep. Can't imagine for the life of me what I'd do thinking of myself as a chunk of the Force."

"But you are, Ta Ende."

"I said, 'enough'! And I'm not going to tell you what you have to do, okay? Just make a little suggestion. You want to be a Jedi, or at least try to be one. It's what you really want, and you'll do anything for it. Now, if that's so, then dammit, that's what you ought to be. The hell with the old man; don't be a chump like I was, mewling around till they told me I could leave. Go for it, Obi; it's your life, not his."

Obi-wan knew what he had heard, but he also knew Ende-deuc was a slippery sort. "Um, would you mind repeating that?"

Ende-deuc leaned forward until their noses nearly touched. "Do I really frigging have to?"

* * *

Ende smiled to see the expression on Obi's face. He wondered if he had been so raw boned and know-it-all at seventeen, and knew he had. Small wonder Lde-ter had lost patience with him so many times; Ende granted his father that point in their long differences.

"It'll probably do Arde more good than he knows to lose you. Get him out of that damn yacht and back to Ves where he can find himself a woman and breed a new heir to get you off the hook. Good idea, right? And don't worry about him cutting you off. Hell, I'm worse than any Jedi--and rough on him, I'll admit it--and he still talks to me. In his fashion."

Happily bewildered, the boy laughed. "You're the only other person--you and Ta Allyn are the only ones who have come right out and said--I can't explain how it feels--"

"Good, don't try. And wipe that beatific look off your face; your father might be watching."

"Oh, don't worry, he isn't. I can always tell."

"Ah--" Ende decided to ignore that remark. "Hm. I'm supposed to be leading you down the roadway to debauchery, right? I don't suppose it would hurt anyone to let Arde think that's what I'm doing...It's your natal day, isn't it? Well, I can't think of a duller way to spend it, short of jail, which can be pretty lively sometimes, actually. What say we blow this rock and hit Downport? I'm sure with the right

amount of cash my Cap could be persuaded to lift off, oh, say, any minute now...."

* * *

Arde-wan cleared his desk of tapes, the clatter of plasticine clearly enunciating his irritation. Yverane continued listing the hostels and flophouses checked without making note of his employer's mood, which only darkened Kenobi's attitude more. Dammit, he had wanted Ende to spend time with Obi, but shipping out to places unknown was totally out of bounds! Two weeks had passed without word, and when the *Ko-Rec* had finally been chased down, the ship had led them back to Commenor, where the downport was one of the wildest warrens of outlawry this side of Mos Eisley.

"Have you kept a check on the port lists?" he snapped.

"Yes, Arde-wan."

"And the ship's still here?"

"Yes, it's still here."

"Then why haven't you found them yet?! Damn it, do I or do I not have a full ship of retainers to search?"

"Arde, even the engineer is looking..."

"That damn Corellian's probably drunk in some alley. Have you checked the Hidey-hole?"

"The what?"

"Or the Cracked Crystal?"

"Arde-wan, those places aren't listed anywhere--"

"I imagine you didn't even make it to the Roundabout." Kenobi tapped his fingers impatiently on the desk. "Yverane, the kind of place my brother and his friends hang out in aren't listed in any sort of hospitality listing! The Merchant's Affair, The Screw Loose, those are the cantinas and dives Ende frequents, though godsforbid your fine Omnan skin should be seen in one of them. Get my cloak! I've done this before, I can do it again. Sometimes it seems like rescuing people from themselves is all I'm good for."

* * *

The traditional comely wench poured Ende another glass of kleven, and if her features were not like his, or her appendages of the same number, neither Kenobi nor his companions cared. He gave her tail a tweek and passed the new pitcher of brew along to his nephew.

He had to admit Obi-wan was a good

sort; a bit quick with the judgment, but quite responsive to the traditional Corellian ways of dealing with smart alecks. Those minor differences with the Ko-Rec's crew and two weeks of parties and some--ah, 'interesting' was the word he would use when and if he was forced to meet Arde again--interesting experiences out Hoh way, had not put a dent in the boy's energy. In fact, Obi-wan had had plenty of acumen left over to extricate Ende from a testy situation in the Squire's Wench a measure back. The spree looked like ending soon, unfortunately. Ende hadn't really been surprised when Obi had zeroed in on that gather of Jedi in the corner less than three seconds after entering this place, but he was disappointed. Ende had enjoyed this run for his money in the race over who was to win the family title of official renegade, and he would miss Obi-wan. Who, when you got to the bottom line, really didn't have the makings of a true debauchee about him.

Obi could do worse than falling in with Fillipini's gather, too. Ende didn't presume to judge Jedi--in a tight spot he'd call on any help, from hermit scholar or Enclave bookkeeper--but the Urse Jedi and his squad of Wanderers were the fighting sort and easy for company in the roughest of bars. That Obi seemed as comfortable with them as the wealthy and influential at Arde's party pleased Ende.

"That's my nephew," he said, nudging the Corellian who had just sat next to him.

"Hmf. You don't look like the uncle type, Deuc."

"Yeah, well, I am, and he's a good kid. Gonna show his Da and everyone else how good he is one day."

"Anything you say, Deuc, anything you say."

* * *

Obi-wan was not certain what to make of these beings who carried lightsabers but who caroused with the sort his uncle lived with. That they were Jedi had never been in doubt; the sweet communion he had experienced even before he and Ende-deuc had entered the cantina had been confirmation enough. But they were nothing like those he had met on Urt: the cultured Hevilet D'Orgn, the scholarly and patient Master Stasho, and the grave intercessor from Mayon, Gaines. Of course, he had actually only greeted those beings in passing (except for Hevilet who had been with Zadexet when he had visited and who had been singularly unimpressed with Obi-wan's discomfort), but it was difficult to imagine such great Jedi rollicking about like these did.

Diversity. Obi-wan reminded himself, feeling a bit giddy on the mischievous energy that surrounded him; neither could he imagine those Urtian Jedi being tolerated by Ta Ende's friends.

At the moment, those Corellian friends were starting a group song. The words were thrown across the room in friendly challenge, and one of the Jedi, an Urse named Fillipini, called out in friendly derision over one claim in the song. A spacer returned the jibe, declaring no one, not even Jedi, could do better, and the singsong was on.

"What's happening? Is there trouble?" Obi-wan pulled at a Deseratine's shoulder sleeve and repeated his question in the being's native language. It doesn't feel like trouble.

No, of course not, the reptilian said, leaning toward him, ears alert with humor, eyes glittering happily in the saloon's murky lights. We have met that group before and we have bested them at song before, and if they are too dense to remember that, we will not have to pay our bill tonight.

"Aho, FerZEzan!" Fillipini called out, one booted foot on a bench, one furred and muscular limb on his bent knee. "You are a fool, but your money is good! We shall howl you away from this winehold, and you will leave your barrels behind! Choose your champions." A huge paw cuffed Obi-wan. "We even have a Vessan to match against yours!"

* * *

Spacers were backed up to the door of the Merchants' Affair and Arde-wan had to rough his way through to the clearing in the old cantina. The voice he had heard was Ende-deuc's indeed, and as Kenobi elbowed past the last row of patrons rimming the floor, the flamboyantly dressed younger Kenobi flung his cap high into the air, for the last spin of an intricate, rousing dancesong. There was no time to call out to him. No sooner had the crowd's cheer ebbed than a key-in chord rose across the room, with one tenor voice, thin but joyous, unmistakable above the rest.

*In sixty-eight, when the year grew late,
Gdrvue Region shuddered
to hear the roaring of ships of war
as the peace of years was sundered.*

*For Regent Hern was a traitor turned
and he curried Xet's assistance
with rich reward for the Sith Dark Lord
if he'd fell the other Regents.*

It was as simple and crude a rhyme as Emarie had told him years ago, but Arde-wan watched his son sing out the verses with an intensity one might expect of the

most serious whillsong. Arms akimbo, face lit by the Jedi glows that hung over the gather like a borealis, Obi-wan stood before the Jedi in a crimson shirt that could only have come from Ende-deuc.

All the knights joined in the chorus, their disparate voices overcoming their origins to create a wholesome sound that rumbled the rafters of the room.

*Then shout hurray for the bold Enclave!
The Force forever flowing
within the Jedi who shelter peace
with sabers bright and glowing!*

Then it was Obi-wan's turn again, and all Arde-wan could do was watch.

*But civil war mounts a frightful score,
ungoverned but by fortune's whim.
As traitor Hern with his death cry
learned
as the Sith Lord flew against him.*

*Then through the stars of Gdnvue far
did the Dark Lord's legions plunder
and pleading words by Republic heard
brought the Jedi flying skyward!*

So shout hurray for the bold Enclave!

But the Corellians jumped in and, before the boy could continue, sang out in proud defiance about one of their own:

*Now, CasMer was a dauntless Knight,
three squads full sent to fell her.
And though by day in her blood she lay,
three squads full sent lay with her!*

Then shout hurray for Corellians brave!

The mangled chorus continued as the room roared. A human from the Jedi table sent a double jug of wine spilling across the floor with a mighty kick and a flourish of force. With the spoils even, the Corellians pushed Ende-deuc out on the floor to meet his nephew and better the score. Kenobi eyed Kenobi: Obi-wan in a stance gleefully daring, Ende-deuc as jaunty and cunning as ever, and together they sang.

*Twins full sworn were Kenobi born
always, always singing;
for justice reached and a lasting peace
two Knights to die were willing!*

Arde-wan paid no attention as the room rocked again with the refrain. Like the accompaniment to some dramatic presentation, the music was only background for the private confrontation within himself, the final face-off between his dreams and his son's reality.

Obi-wan won. Not time, not education, not even the distractions to the degree Ende-deuc had contributed could mute the brightness within his son. Whether in an Omnan salon, amidst the heavy solemnity

of a Vehenev manse, or surrounded by the dregs of space, Obi-wan's untimate destiny shone clearly. Arde-wan watched his son dance with his brother until all the years in space, all the alien worlds, disappeared and he saw the three of them once again partying within the muted lights of the family home on Ves. It was an easy transition: Obi-wan's face tonight was the same face Arde-wan had seen then, awash with the magic of the Jedi who had come visiting; Ende-deuc was as impossibly young and reckless as he had been and would ever be; and he, Arde-wan, was as helpless to change either of them as always.

Strangely enough, the resignation that settled him as Arde-wan made his way to the Jedi table in the aftermath of the singsong was not so bitter after all. He blamed it on the conviviality about him.

A genial silence surrounded the Jedi table when he neared as if the knights here were waiting for him. Obi-wan turned without being hailed, an unconquerable smile on his face, his manner open and satisfied. Arde-wan traced just the slightest crackle of defensiveness in his son and braced himself; but the confrontation he feared did not materialize.

"Arde, hey Arde! What are you doing here?" He heard Ende-deuc's quick steps behind him. "We were just coming back tonight, no con. Now, I know you're probably--"

"Shhhh," Kenobi said gently, never taking his eyes from his son, his child grown to adult. "You are a bit overdue, Obi; hadn't we better get back to the ship?"

The boy didn't want to go and looked about himself for support. "Go with your sire, young one," he was told instead by a massive Urse. "This has been a good night, but you have your duties. We may meet again in the flow." The decision was the same every way Obi-wan looked:

"See your way through the night, son."

"'S with you, all times."

"Keep your dreams, younger."

The good wishes flowed freely until Arde-wan rested his hand on Obi-wan's shoulder and steered the reluctant boy away. He could feel the disappointment that flowed through Obi-wan. Cautiously, he lightened his touch; still his son stayed with him. Without further attention, they left the saloon.

Ende stepped back from his brother and nephew. He smiled a bit sheepishly at Arde, and could think of nothing else to do

but shrug apologetically at the sad look he received in turn. When he glanced back at Fillipini, the great bear was frowning, a stemmed glass spinning absently between thick, leathery paws.

"His father--my brother is afraid for the boy if he joins the Jedi."

Fillipini started, not expecting the comment or perhaps finding it irrelevant. "Most parents are," he grunted. Placing the glass on the table behind them, he crossed his brown arms. "That does not bother me. Talent will find its way."

"You felt it, too, did you not Filli?" Ende turned, looked about, tried to identify the Jedi who had spoken.

The Urse nodded, his continued growl betraying his concern. "Who could avoid it? He forgets himself and it is impossible to think then. Thanks be to the Way that I am not the Master who must take that one in hand."

"But will anyone agree to train such?" asked a human.

"Will anyone have a choice in the matter?" Fillipini countered.

From across the room, some loud, roaring bellow sounded, raucous and plainly drunk, demanding a singsong rematch. The Jedi shook off their thoughtful mood and returned the call. The silence shattered; the party rattled the cantina again, as if it had never paused.

Ende sought out the human. "What's wrong with my nephew?" he demanded. "Why all the questions about him?"

The human considered his words. "I'm not certain I could explain properly."

"He's a good kid, dammit," Kenobi insisted.

"I imagine he is." The other smiled and poured them both more klevan. "For the sake of the galaxy, let us hope you're right."

* * *

His father had not said a word since leaving the party, nothing beyond the necessary murmurs to guide the taxi, to secure the shuttle. Away from the Jedi, Obi-wan felt alone. He shivered slightly and sank lower into his seat, his eyes closed, his hands shoved deep in his trouser pockets. His shirt was draped limply and gaudily about his chest.

They were going to fight again tonight. Per would remind him of his responsibilities and he would counter with a

greater duty, a greater need he felt the call to meet. The subject would then precipitate into details that would meet and clash and explode once again. He would remind his father that to be Jedi was not necessarily to fight; Arde-wan would remind him that he was not a pacifist. He would speak of obligations and his father would call him selfish to forget what he owed the family, the allya: his knowledge, his youth, his children to take his place. And Arde-wan's arguments would be sound, would reflect yet another fine education, and nine years spent as Wreyn Emarie's husband. If only Mem... Obi-wan caught himself. He would not bring up his mother, he promised as the shuttle docked aft the *Serene Star*. He could not bear to see the pain he was not allowed to erase in Per's eyes again, or the way Arde-wan flinched, as if from a physical blow, whenever Obi-wan carelessly called her to his defense.

In the ship's study, Arde-wan dismissed the attendant and poured his cordial glass of grenectar himself. Shrugging off his cloak, he let it drop on a chair, then dropped himself on a lounge and rested his face in his hands a moment. When Obi-wan did not come any further into the room, he gestured at the couch opposite. Warily, Obi-wan walked over; he perched on the edge of a cushion, ready to run.

"I suppose these weeks have been fun for you?"

"Yes, Per, they have."

"Ende didn't drag you through too many slums, did he?"

"No. Ta Ende has some unusual friends, but he never got drunk enough not to listen."

"Ende never listens to anyone."

"If you know how..." Obi-wan hesitated at his father's sharp look. "I just talked to him, Per, nothing more."

"None of Emarie's tricks? Or whatever else your friends have taught you?"

"Nothing more than Mem ever did!" Obi-wan shot back, immediately repentant. "Per, I'm--"

Arde-wan held up his hand to forestall the apology when the com buzzed. Reaching backward to the desk, he swung the comstation about enough to face it. "Not now, Yver, I'm busy."

"I think you ought to see this, sir," came the secretary's voice, followed by an array of notations and figures across the screen. Arde-wan scanned the accounts patiently at first, then with a greater intensity. "Obi-wan," he said, "this is a bill from the Verisimul on Pekin."

Obi-wan sincerely wished the Company secretary a year of nasty nightmares.

His father flicked the console back about and stood. "What were you doing there?"

Obi-wan shrugged. "The *Ko-Ree* had a cargo to Hoh and stopped over."

"But why did you leave the ship?!"

"I was bored." But the expression on Arde-wan's face was too severe for Obi-wan to maintain his air of nonchalance. "I wanted to see if it was all I'd heard. I had the money."

"You had the money." Arde-wan's tone was scathing and Obi-wan looked away. Suddenly, his father was at his side and turning him about forcibly. "You talk of being a Jedi, yet you are a child and a fool who willingly steps into that filthy den!?"

His temper roused, Obi-wan shook off his father's hands. "And if a Jedi won't go into a place that trades in slaves, who will but those who buy and sell the flesh themselves?!"

"You are in the Father's own luck that you did not become one of those slaves yourself! They like young folk too well there, or did you think I never let you roam Hoh system alone because I wanted to deprive you?"

"Some of those slave masters were wearing Kenobi jewelry! It was disgusting!"

"Of course, it is disgusting! And don't change the subject; ridding the universe of slaves is not the Company's business, nor is governing who may and may not purchase our goods!"

"It's the Jedi's business and mine."

"And I suppose that amount on the fiche is the cost of your bail after pontificating to the owners why their establishment is an affront to the Republic?"

"No."

Arde-wan folded his arms. "Then what is it for?"

"I bought a slave."

"You what?"

"And I gave him to a friend of mine."

"Obi-wan..."

"My friend is a Jedi from Urt. He was there on business and I gave him the slave to return to wherever the slave came from. His name is Hevilet D'Orgn, if you

want to check on that, too."

"D'Orgn? The financiers?"

"A son. He was with me most of the time, if that will make you feel better." Which was stretching the truth a bit, Obi-wan knew, but his father needed to be defused about Pekin quickly. The Jedi Hevilet had kept by him only after being hailed by Obi-wan, slave in tow, outside the Verisimul, and Hevilet's lecture then had rung irritatingly similar to Arde-wan's now.

"How did you get by with such a low fee for a Verisimul slave?" Arde-wan asked suspiciously.

"I gave him an offer he couldn't help but accept."

"Obi-wan..."

"Nothing more than Mem ever did," Obi-wan answered deliberately this time.

Arde-wan ran his long fingers through his hair as he paced. When he reached the viewport, he leaned on a wall shelf and laughed softly, "Obi, what you interpret your mother's simple instructions to be...I was worried about you; I should have worried about Ende, and all of Downport." His back still to Obi-wan, he added, "So, you are still determined to study at an Enclave."

"No, Per, not just study. You know that. I will be a Jedi."

"And nothing I can do will stop you." Kenobi turned. The annoyance that showed on his face was distinctly unparental. "Absolutely nothing Arde-wan Kenobi could say about it means anything at all. Right?"

"No," Obi-wan said simply, honestly.

"And I suppose those Wanderers tonight are your idea of proper instructors?"

Obi-wan was confused. "They are Jedi."

"Oh yes, and fine Jedi, too, most likely. Your uncle Allyn is a good enough knight, I suppose, for all his faults. Force forbid, we should start demanding the Order be perfect; they might start believing us, and then where would we be?"

"Per..."

"Oh, shut up, Obi, and let me think."

While Arde-wan watched the stars through the shield, Obi-wan studied his rings and struggled with himself to keep the growing sense of anticipation he felt from controlling his reactions.

"I suppose you have a particular Enclave in mind?"

Cautiously, Obi-wan looked up.

"Would it be too much for me to hope it is one at least as established as Ves?"

"Actually, Per, I had had Alderaan in mind."

"Well! I imagine I should be thankful your taste runs true in everything."

"Per, any Enclave would do. It's just that I've been writing to Shitaki, I mean, Captain Shitaki, and..." His voice trailed off under his father's glare. "I wrote to her, Per," Obi-wan insisted. "You can't blame that on the Jedi, just me."

"There are times, Obi, that I think I ought to have checked your correspondence."

"Per!"

"And any Enclave will not do. I'm not so ignorant of the Jedi not to know Alderaan's achievements and status. I can't imagine you being happy anywhere else. In other circumstances...I would have insisted you school there."

"Of course," Obi-wan mimicked wearily. "I'm a Kenobi; nothing but the best for us."

"And who are you to criticize--" His father stopped the words, but the virulent bitterness that boiled in Arde-wan's aura brought Obi-wan's head up sharply, in shock at the wild emotion his words had unlocked. An image flashed in Obi-wan's mind, a picture too violent for his father to contain; a wish that just once in Arde-wan's life he might wield the same terrible control over his child that a Vehenev father did, and lock Obi-wan away until this madness passed. Obi-wan's own heart beat angrily at the thought, appalled that his father might so reduce their love--but no, he would not remember. He would not allow this revelation to stay with him, this glimpse stolen from his father's inner self. He had won; he could afford to understand Per's disappointment. Maybe one day, he would forget it completely.

As if equally disturbed with his reaction, Arde-wan shook his head and came

back to the loungers. He sat opposite Obi-wan and after a slight hesitation, took both his son's hands in his own.

"Obi-wan, you once ran away from the Jedi." Obi opened his mouth and his father continued, "Quiet. Listen to me. You couldn't escape what you are. There's something else you can't run away from. You will always be my son, a Kenobi of the allya Kenobi. You can't walk away from all that implies. You are the last of our family line in the allya. Jedi or not, I will expect you to meet your obligations to our family."

"Per." Obi-wan shifted his weight, but Arde-wan held his hands firmly and would not let him slip away.

"Leave here, Obi, and you leave as an adult, whatever your age. And as an adult, I will offer you this: Give me a grandchild to take your place at my side, and I will not stand in your way, whatever you do. But get yourself killed before I have that child, and I will never forgive you. We will meet within the Force as strangers."

//Per.// Obi-wan wailed his objection through their thoughts. His father did not push him away this time, but held onto the link and made it as secure as that which they shared with their bodies. In the bridge between them, Obi-wan saw the desperation that drove his father and felt the pain himself, made it his own. And with that he made his promise although he could not have said what he vowed, so alien to his young heart was his father's need.

Perhaps when he was older, when he was wiser, he could think again on this night and make it clear.

Obi-wan dropped his gaze. "Then I will be going to Alderaan," he said quietly.

"Yes, you will go to Alderaan," his father answered, letting go of his hands, sitting back on the cushions. "I will write out my permission tomorrow."

And that, Obi-wan told himself, not wanting to think very hard on what had happened, not raising his eyes above the hands he clasped together to hide their trembling, is all that really matters.

End Tale the Second



BLURABLES

This zine listing is in no particular order, but rather, just as it comes to me while I type it. The zines listed herein are ones which we think you may be interested in for one reason or another. So read, enjoy--and tell them that TIME WARP sent you!

Universal Translator. General zine listings and reviews. \$1.50 each. Make checks payable to Rose Marie Jakubjansky, 39-84 48th St., Long Island City, NY 11104.

Forum. General zine listings and reviews. KathE Donnelly, 6302 So. Spotswood Street, Littleton, CO 80120. 4/\$3.60.

Jundland Wastes. SWARS letter/reviewzine, zine listings. 3/\$2.70. Pat Nussman, 113 Washington Street, Williamsburg, VA 23185.

Comlink. SWARS letter/reviewzine. 3/\$2.75. Carol Mularski, 914 Bernd St., Pittsburgh, PA 15210.

Warped Space. SWARS/ST/Media zine. SASE for current prices and/or availability of back issues. T'Kuhtian Press, 5132 Jo Don Drive, East Lansing, MI 48823.

Masiform D. TREK/SF zine. SASE. Poison Pen Press, 627 East 8th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11218.

One Way Mirror. A STAR TREK novel by Barbara Wenk. \$5.00 book rate, \$6.75 special handling. Available from Poison Pen Press, 627 East 8th, Brooklyn, NY 11218.

Twin Suns: Tatoo II. SWARS zine. \$6.25 plus postage (\$1.50 east of Kansas, \$2.00 west of Kansas). Jani Hicks, 3066D Jewelstone Drive, Dayton, OH 45414.

Pegasus V. Send \$5.00 and SASE to reserve a copy. SWARS zine. Judi L. Hendricks, Pegasus Press, 6327 North Francisco, Chicago, IL 60659.

Galactic Discourse 3. TREK zine. \$12 first class, \$11 UPS, \$10.55 book rate. Laurie Huff, 208 W. Crown, Eureka, IL 61530.

Guardian 3. ST/SWARS/UNCLE. \$8.60 special handling insured. Mazeltough Press, c/o Cynthia Levine, 1805 Highway 101 N, Plymouth, MN 5547.

Facets. Harrison Ford zine. SASE availability and price. Facets, 1359 Portage #1, Kalamazoo, MI 49901.

Tatooine Tribune. SWARS zine. \$7.50 seamail. \$8.50 airmail. The Rebel Alliance, c/o Karen Miller, 49 Cairnes Road, Glenorie 2157, New South Wales, Australia.

Hydrospanner Zero. SWARS. Make checks payable to Kevin Martin, c/o Hydrospanner, PO Box 130, Ramsey, NJ 07446.

Evolution of a Rebel. A SWARS novel by Jean L. Stevenson. SASE to Jean L. Stevenson, 61 Union Place, Lynbrook, NY 11563.

Nu Ormenel Collected 1-5, Arakenyo. One of the most intricate of the STAR TREK fan fiction universes. Issue #4 contains an outstanding "mirror" story. SASE current availability to Fern Marder, 342 E. 53rd St, 4D, New York, NY 10022.

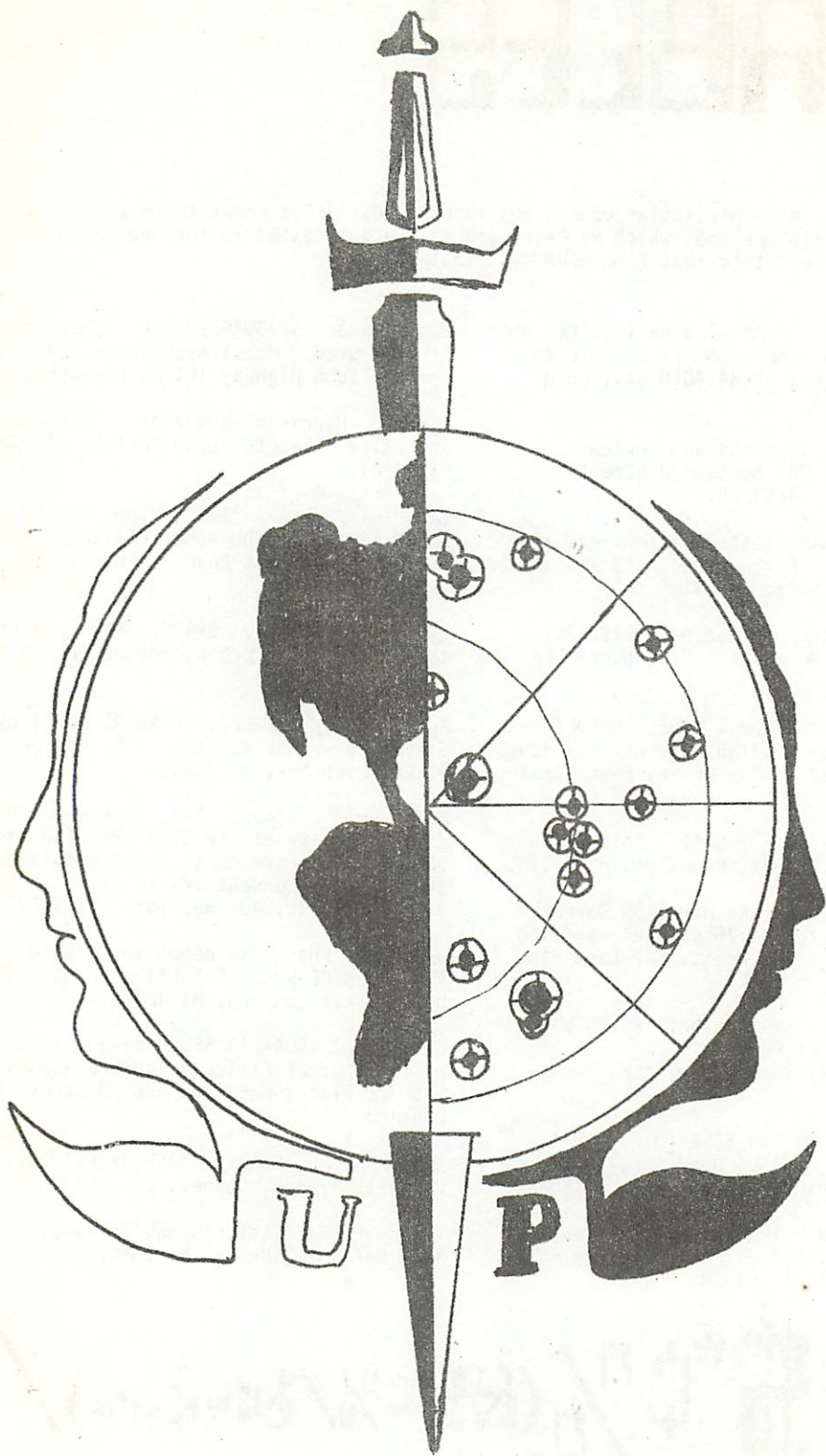
Dracula. What else needs to be said? \$9.75 first, \$8.85 UPS. T'Kuhtian Press, 5132 Jo Don Drive, East Lansing, MI 48823.

Liberator. BLAKE'S SEVEN zine. SASE for US prices. Janet Ellicott, 43 Brooksbank House, Retreat Place, Morning Lane, Hackney, London E9, England.

Equal Space. SWARS. SASE Sheryl Adsit, 13200 Blodgett Avenue, Downey, CA 90242.

Eepin Times. Asteris Navis Press, c/o Pat Nolan, 3284 Hull Ave, Bronx, NY 10467.





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